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HANDS ON

SPLINTER CELL PANDORA TOMORROW

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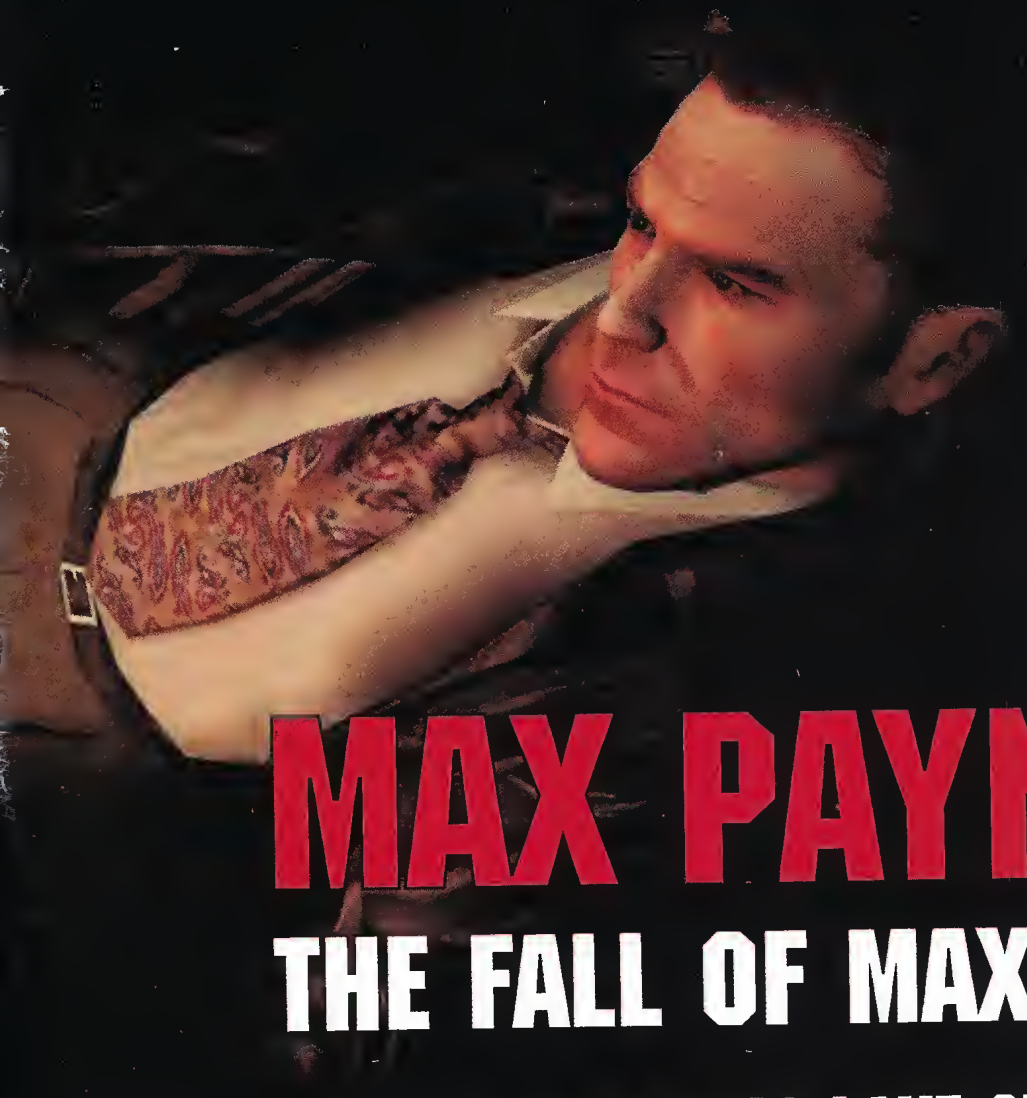

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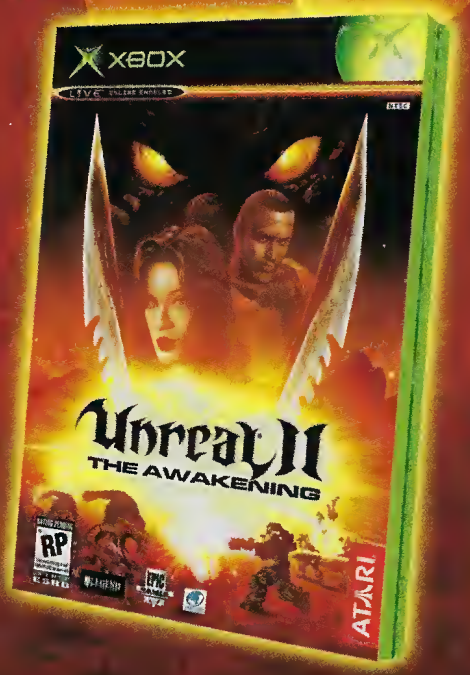

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Blood and Gore
Violence

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FREEDOM ISN'T FREE

WORLD

Diplomacy Is Primary Weapon in America's Quest to End Indonesian Crisis.

By Eric C. Baldwin
GLOBAL PRESS NETWORK

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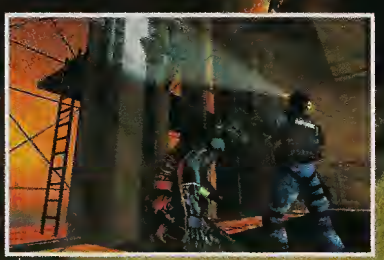

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Conflict: Desert Storm II—Back to Baghdad
World Championship Pool 2004
Silent Scope Complete
Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon

EtherealDragonz@hotmail.com

050

X04: The Year of Xbox

In some Asian cultures, it's the Year of the Monkey. Here in the States, 2004 is shaping up to be the year of Xbox. As Microsoft's console stretches into maturity, take a 22-page journey into the future with *XBN* for an exclusive look at the games, developers, and trends that will define the biggest year in gaming yet. We promise—all killer, no filler.

038
Cover Story

The House that George Built (the Wookiees helped, too) returns once again to that most fertile ground, *Star Wars* for two brand-new and swankiastic Xbox titles: *Republic Commando* and *Battlefront*. Get the full scoop on both games by turning to yon page or suffer a horrible death. Your call.

XTRA

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NeXtBN

This place looks strangely familiar…there's Reviews Editor Greg Orlando, glowering at me from above his spectacles, and Editor Evan Shamoon, poring over pages and "making more with the engoodenating." And there's Drew, designing the cover story while wearing his winter coat and a woolly hat. But this past year has brought new talent to *Xbox Nation*, which, when we launched in November 2001, had but three staffers. There's Cindy Lum, who cracks the whip on deadlines, and Che Chou, who looks mostly pissed off, but swears he's having fun. And as of this issue, we've got a new art director, Andrew Burwell, whose X04 feature—I hope you'll agree—looks very cool indeed. And I'd like to introduce you to David Chen, formerly of our sister publication, *GMR*. He'll be charged with making Xpress the most up-to-the-minute, informative, and entertaining part of the magazine. Also, pigs fear him, for he lusts after their bacon with a terrifying singularity of purpose.

So, armed with fresh talent, what can you expect from *XBN* in 2004 (apart from compulsory drinking of Earl Grey tea with English crumpets)? For starters, we're now published every single month instead of every two months. With an eye to even greater success, we'll also be redesigning the magazine as of April. Don't panic—you're going to love it. In the meantime, I present you with an issue packed full of amazing games, from the *Unreal*-powered *Republic Commando* to the shadowy elegance of *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow* to the movie magic of *James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing*.

You'll laugh! You'll cry! You'll puke! And next month, you'll sh*t.

Simon Cox

The **Monster Mashed** Edition

Meet the team!

Simon Cox
The Brains (Eater)

You don't get to be the smartest man at *Xbox Nation* with fancy "book larnin'" or by studying your numbers. In this horrific tale of undead love and also sock puppetry, Xombie Lord Simon Cox eats brains the way they were meant to be eaten: British style, with your pinky delicately pointing toward Queen Elizabeth.

How it ends: With dessert, of course.

Evan Shamoon
Science Gone Wrong!

Doctor of Loveology Evan "Samhain" Shamoon created an elixir that makes a person fall madly for Roseanne Barr. Now shrunken heads are his only friends, revenge against mankind his only bedmate. Solace is his walking stick and ennui his shoelaces.

How it ends: In a surprise twist, the fork runs away with the spoon.

Cindy Lum
The Blast From the Past

Unearthed after a nice 3,527-year nap, Cindy Lummy brings new meaning to the words "spicy wrap." Her turn-ons include shambling and moaning, and her turn-offs include fire and stain-fighting bleach. It wouldn't be a wacky romantic comedy if she didn't find love amid the Triffids.

How it ends: Four weddings, two funerals, and a Briss.

Che Chou
Che the Merciless

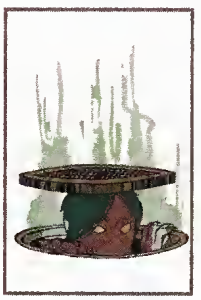
Call him Che the Merciless for his love of scaldings, kidney punchings, and also monkey-kicking and orphan-baiting. When he meets his squeaky-clean demise under the bristles of a street sweeper, even the baby-eating trolls weep with joy. It's comedy most dark.

How it ends: A question mark at the end of "The End" leaves room open for a $$$equel.

Greg Orlando
Atomic Superbehemoth

Irradiated snack-treat technology and unrestrained furiosity combined to form Gregzilla, an Atomic Superbehemoth who, despite looking a lot like Godzilla, actually infringes on no copyrights or trademarks. Watch out, Oceanside, NY, because you're in for such a stomping.

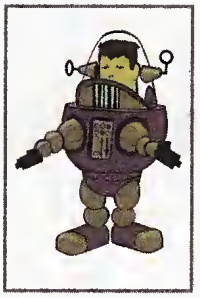
How it ends: With the teaser, "Gregzilla will return in *Yesterday Never Passes Gas!*"



David Chen
It Came From Davidchen!

Attention inhabitants of Earth: Davidchen wants delightful pastries, women, tickets to see the new Jim Carrey movie *Shmuck Makes Faces for Two Hours*, pie, that thing that can scramble an egg while it's still inside its shell, and three albinos of virtue pure.

How it ends: We realize the alien is the most human one of us all. And then we kill and eat him.



Andrew Burwell
Torbor X-3

A kindly scientist built Torbor X-3 to help mankind. Boy, was he a dullard. Torbor, now calling itself Andrew Burwell runs amok on its human masters and crushes many a brain.

How it ends: Burwell is pertect. But it was created by a human who was imperfect. How could an imperfect creature make a perfect being? It…DOES…NOT…COMPUTE!

Andrew Mendoza
Invisible Mendoza

Having accidentally drunk Coke and Pepsi together, amateur phrenologist Mendoza found he wasn't there anymore. Now he spends most of his time visiting many, many women's locker rooms. His mortal enemy is an invisible child-proof medicine bottle cap.

How it ends: The Muppets perform their friendship dance and everyone dies.

XBN

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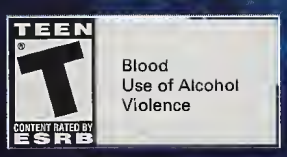

Blood
Use of Alcohol
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Take Your Revenge

You are El Tejón — a gunfighter betrayed by your own gang and left for dead. But in the Old West, a dead man still has a hand to play. Hunt down your failed assassins to even the score. Justice shall be yours!

"An online western shooter that would do Clint Eastwood proud."
– IGN XBox

"From the saloons to the stunning horseback gameplay, Dead Man's Hand looks and smells as bad-ass as you can possibly imagine."
— PLAY Magazine

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
Crude Humor
Suggestive Themes
Violence

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Last Issue...

The scantily clad *Dead or Alive* fighter Lei-Fang brought forth a "come hither, and bring some cash" look, and you bet your powdered dandy's bottom you went thither. Issue #11 of *Xbox Nation* then proceeded to wow you with its massive reviews section wherein 47 games came under scrutiny and a gargantuan Ultimate Xbox Buyer's Guide that, of course, was too gargantuan to consider recapping in this short space. Tidings of great joy came in the form of an interview with Will "The Sims" Wright and a peek at BioWare's new skull-crushing RPG *Jade Empire*. In all, it truly was a Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, Fine Festivus, Stupendous Spendover, and Killer Kwanza. But only if you bought two copies of the magazine.

Music Hath Charms

I want to buy *Xbox Music Mixer* for PC to Xbox connectivity, but I'm still running Windows ME. The Xbox Web site says XP is required for the *Mixer* PC transfer tool to work. Do I really have to upgrade my OS in order to utilize this feature? Don't tell me Microsoft has alienated ME, 98, and Macintosh users!

Richard Lopes

Certainly not.

We'll let Microsoft tell you that.

"*Xbox Music Mixer* has a number of technical innovations including the ability to connect Xbox to a personal computer via a home network—a first for any title in the console industry," a Microsoft representative, possibly a computer itself, said. "While enhanced features are available for use with the PC, *Music Mixer* was designed so that the product does not require a computer. All you need is the Xbox itself—there is no need for a PC to enjoy the fun and compelling experiences available with the title.

"For those who choose to use the PC features, we focused on creating an easy to use, safe, secure Windows XP solution first because that's what the vast majority of our users have as a PC platform. As usual, we'll track consumer response to this product and listen to what consumers want to see next."

Second Opinions Needed

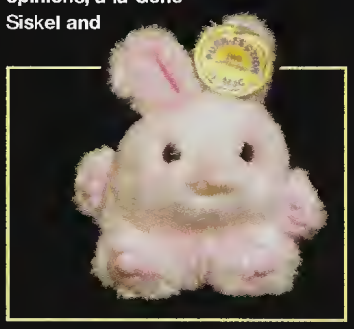
I have no problem with games I like getting a poor score in your reviews; after all, to each his own, right? I do, however, have a problem with having a single reviewer review all four major basketball releases, since it prevents the buyer from getting an objective picture. While I disagree with Jeff Pearlman's assessment of *NBA Live 2004* and *ESPN NBA 2004*, my concern is that having the same reviewer cover competing games in a single genre severely limits any objective value your reviews may have.

Here's what I propose: Have another reviewer offer a second opinion, especially when it comes to competing games. It'll make your reviews more objective and prevent having a single person's tastes influencing your entire readership. That said, keep up the good work!

Matthieu Raillard
Charlottesville, VA

The problem with second opinions in reviews is they're not altogether very useful. Think about it: Either they affirm the initial critique, in which case you get two people saying exactly the same thing or there's a disagreement and readers are left to wonder whose judgement is more accurate. It works better when two reviewers are given equal time (or space) to present their opinions, à la Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert, but sadly, *Xbox Nation* has neither the time nor the resources to present two equal-sized reviews for every game.

It's always been *XBN*'s belief that reviews should be authoritative. That's why we only have one reviewer per game—because choosing the right critic means not needing to rely on a second opinion. That's why we handpicked *Sports Illustrated* writer and longtime console fan Jeff Pearlman to tackle our baseball and basketball game reviews.



■ The professional critics at *Xbox Nation* give this fluffy little moppet a five out of 10 because it is, in fact, very last Tuesday at noon.

More With the Goodness

I enjoy *XBN* as opposed to the official magazine because I feel I am getting a nonbiased slant on the news, and everything isn't the greatest game ever. All games in that other magazine seem to score seven or higher.

My problem with your reviews is that your reviewers seem ridiculously jaded to the point that they are insulting. Many of the reviews seem to be of the variety, "I don't like this kind of game anymore...four out of 10," or "I played this game or one like it on my PC/other console last year...three out of 10." Two lines saying a certain game is so last week does not make for a professional review.

I do not care if you played the game on another system, or your PC. I don't care if this is your kind of game, or if you feel snubbed that you didn't get the hot game this month. You are professional writers who say you want to give the real, nonpolitical scoop on new and cool Xbox games. I'd love to know how good a game is on its own merits, do the controls work, does it do the task its genre of game is supposed to, is it entertaining.

The other magazine has a demo disk. I need something else from you guys besides an attitude of "if you don't know about this game already, then I'm not going to tell you about it!" A little objectivity goes a long way.

Ted Biggs

"Two lines saying a certain game is so last week **does not make for a professional review.**" –Ted Biggs

We passed your letter around the office, Mr. Ted Biggs and your heartfelt words elicited the following responses from *XBN*'s editorial and art staffs:

Evan Shamoon: "Not fun at all. Two out of 10."

Greg Orlando: "Ragging on *XBN* for its reviews is so last letter. Three out of 10."

Che Chou: "Where are the specific criticisms? Three out of 10."

Simon "Meet the new boss, he's the same as the old boss" Cox: "Sigh. If anyone needs me, I'll be lamenting the loss of the British Empire. Or at lunch eating something with blood and kidneys in it. Four out of 10."

Cindy Lum: "Whatever. Three."

Andrew Mendoza: "Bad font usage on the email. Two."

Logitechnically Incorrect

In your "Hot for the Holidays" feature (issue #11), you described the Logitech wireless controller as "Completely cordless." You said the "controller ITSELF accommodates two memory cards or an Xbox Live Headset." You are wrong. The docks for the headset and memory cards are on the transmitter that is plugged into the Xbox, considerably shortening that 20-foot range (and batteries) if you want to play online. It's not exactly "highly functional."
Neal Gant
Nashville, TN

Our apologies for the poorly worded writeup. The memory card slots for the Logitech wireless controller are indeed on the controller's receiver. The offending monkey who botched the text has been boiled and stuffed with spackle.

But if you think the Logitech controller somehow possesses the otherworldly ability to negate other peripherals' cords (such as the Xbox Live Communicator), we'd like to suggest you run for public office—specifically, el presidente of Insanidadistan.

Eleven Not Heaven

It's sad to see this issue of *XBN* (#11). Not only is it the worst issue of *XBN* yet, it reminds me of all the other Xbox magazines. This makes me a bit nervous.

This issue had very little depth and just a bunch of half-page reviews/previews. It was put together like a business presentation: Tell us what you are going to review, review it.

With all the great holiday releases you could not come up with two or three in-depth articles on any of the games or developers? It's a crying shame. I just hope this does not signal a trend for *XBN*.

On a positive note, the magazine still looks great but I want the writing back. Maybe you were just too busy playing all those new games to do any serious writing. Get back to it, please.
Dana Frost

In our defense, both the Reviewatron 6270 and the Previewatron 8140 were on the fritz last issue and not even our fixin' stick could make 'em work good again. Hopefully, the repairman will be around soon, Dana.

Write To *XBN*!

■ El Presidente of Insanidadistan or Fidel Castro, it matters not. Write to us!

Got a question you feel can only be answered by the soulless letter-answering automaton Lettertron 3135? Feel like heaping praise or lavishing criticism on the various *Xbox Nation* staff members? Just want to say hello because your life is a swirling hell? Well, then we recommend you send us an email at **XBN@ziffdavis.com**. Remember, folks, like the man says, it don't cost nothing.

□ Schmaltzy pop music, B-movies, chess-boxing reruns, and so much more. Master it all with Microsoft's Media Center remote—or an Xbox controller.

CONVERGENCE COMES HOME

Anywhere, anytime, Microsoft just wants you to be entertained. Let your Xbox lead the way!

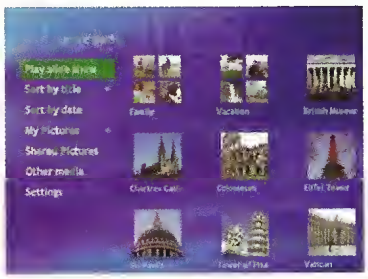
Xbox Nation probed the stew of blood, testosterone, silicone, and tears that is the Consumer Electronics Show 2004 in Las Vegas, and returned with a taste of the future. At least, one William H. Gates' particular version of it....

Microsoft has been plugging the unwired, interconnected lifestyle for some time now; with the announcement of its Media Center Extender Technology, the press and public finally got a good look at how that might become a reality. Media Center PC owners can soon wirelessly access their digital library of live and recorded television, photos and movies, music, and more to and from any room of their house. Interconnectivity ensures that wherever there's a screen, access to all media all the time is possible—pausing, for example, a movie in one room and then resuming it in another. This is accomplished via a set-top box like Microsoft's Media Center Extender or additional hardware—which includes Media Center–equipped TVs and handheld devices—in development from a veritable who's who of equipment manufacturers.

So if you already own an Xbox, why should you care? Because someone in Seattle was thinking ahead when they decided that Bill's black box would serve as a perfect node for the Media Center's deluge of digital possibilities. Hence, the Xbox Media Center Extender Kit—an application DVD, installation CD-ROM, Media Center remote, and IR receiver—which is slated to ship late this year (pricing and release date specifics have yet to be revealed). Blake Fischer, content planner at Microsoft, shed some light on some of the possibilities, like accessing your MP3 collection—wirelessly—from any room in the house (up to five instances of the Media Center interface can be run simultaneously). The kit also includes Xbox Live functionality: Gamers on your friends list can invite you to an online match even while you're pursuing other, less interactive, pleasures. Like television.

Admittedly, there are assumptions being made on behalf of the consumer here. But suddenly, a future in which every member of every household can replay the latest episode of *Space Cadets* in the kitchen, loop their latest vacation photos in the den, or simply play *Halo 2*—online, on the toilet, or both—isn't too hard to envisage. And while this announcement wasn't as immediately and apparently sexy as, say, a slimmed down iPod, it's tangible proof that the convergent lifestyle is not only in reach, but also quite possibly user friendly. Assuming, of course, that you're already sporting an MS-approved Media Center PC.

☐ The Media Center Extender (prototype pictured) opens up your digital library to the entire household. But wouldn't you rather use an Xbox?



☐ The interface is, admittedly, none too stylish—but it looks to feature facile functionality where it counts.

Avril Rex, vampire writer, KOTOR Trumps the 1UPs

1UP AWARDS

CES 2004 served as the backdrop for the first annual 1UP awards, with numerous industry insiders, and hangers-on in attendance for the largest made-styled videogames awards ceremony to date. Popular favorites including *THUG*, *Splinter Cell*, *Halo*, and *Soul Calibur II* won awards in their respective categories, but LucasArts and Bioware were the big winners of the evening: the critically lauded *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* took home awards for Best RPG and Game of the Year.

Game in 180 Seconds
Driv3r promo on film, online

Forgoing vowels for digits, Atari has rechristened the pedestrian *Driver 3* as the (arguably) sexier *Driv3r*. To hammer home the catchier title's cosmetic subtleties, Atari announced a short film, *Run the Gauntlet*, courtesy of RSA—Ridley Scott's commercial production company—in January. First revealed in rough-cut form at the *Driv3r* launch event in San Francisco, the three-minute featurette proved to be unexplored and generally disappointing. The game itself, featuring Michelle Rodriguez, Michael Madsen, and Mickey Rourke, will hopefully prove more compelling.

WINE AND CHEESE TO REPLACE THE DEW

"Bang the Machine" exhibit gives videogamecentric artists a forum for their work

On January 15, San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts played host to the opening of "Bang the Machine: Computer Gaming Art and Artifacts," an exhibition featuring videogame-inspired [illegible] pieces.

The soiree kicked off with a speech by Will Wright, creator of *The Sims*, who spoke about the inherent potential of games as a unique social outlet that, in his opinion, is poised to explode. Its interactive worlds and their connections are rapidly entering [illegible] to draw parallels between [illegible] to be imminent and to the videogame industry's increasing realism, as well as the fall of barriers in more traditional fine arts.

On display was an impressive assortment of screenshots, artwork, including a 7-foot-2 mechanical [illegible] battle of Quake Recreation, and [illegible]

XBOX 5.1 SURROUND SOUND SYSTEM

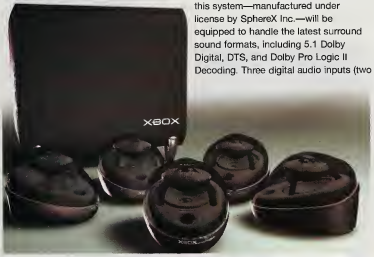
For the Xbox owner who has just about everything

Unveiled at CES 2004 was the Xbox 5.1 Surround Sound System, comprised of five satellite speakers, an 8-inch subwoofer, a 300-watt amp and decoder unit, and a $500 price tag. That's a hefty sum, to be sure, but it's aimed at that much touted mid-20's consumer with disposable income and a keen eye for tech toys.

Tailor-made for digital entertainment, this system—manufactured under license by SphereX Inc.—will be equipped to handle the latest surround sound formats, including 5.1 Dolby Digital, DTS, and Dolby Pro Logic II Decoding. Three digital audio inputs (two optical, one coaxial), single analog audio and USB inputs, and a headphone jack enable plenty of auricular options.

The speakers use Omnipolar technology, dispersing sound in 360 degrees, instead of the more limited cone of sound put out by more conventional speakers. The idea is that by re-creating the same "natural" ratio of direct to reflected sound (70/30), the Omnipolar system will generate an actual, three-dimensional soundstage, effectively engulfing the listener in sound, regardless of where they're seated.

Sounds nice enough, but the flimsy confines of pre-fab conference hall meeting-room walls are far from suitable for demonstrating any speaker setup's effectiveness. An in-depth, isolated demonstration should prove to be far more revealing. SphereX has plans to reveal and release additional Xbox-related accessories in the future; the Xbox 5.1 Surround Sound System rolls onto store shelves in March.



The return of the Worms

[illegible] Acclaim re-licensed a publishing deal for developer Team 17's *Worms 3D* for Xbox[illegible] system. You will be the first one to [illegible] online [illegible] [illegible]

Death from above

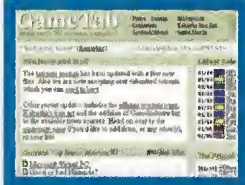
[illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

Kingdom reacquired

[illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF A CAREFULLY CALCULATED ASS-KICKING
WRATH
UNLEASHED™
Be warned - this is not a mere battle of brawn. In this world, war must be waged with a wary hand. Journey from land to land, battle to battle as you deftly command your army of demons, centaurs and dragons. Exploit their strengths. Mind their weaknesses. Slash, claw and slay your way to power - and if you must, unleash your wrath. Cast magic spells. Pit darkness against light. Bend fire, wind and water to your will. And ultimately dominate the world.
TEEN
T
Fantasy Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org
THE COLLECTIVE
XBOX
PlayStation®2
LUCAS Arts
wrathunleashed.com

Connected
Tune in and log on...



www.gametab.com
Simple, solid, and easy, and one of the best options for round-ups of gaming news from around the International Network. Compiling headlines taken from Slashdot, CV&G, Penny Arcade, and more or less everything else, Gametab does the work for you.

www.extremesegway.com
There's not really much that needs to be said here. Just sneak a peak at the picture above, and tell us you don't want to see more. Is it real? Absolutely not. Is it funny? We thought so. Is it socially relevant? Only time will tell, friends, only time will tell.

www.nightmarearmor.com
Sid Garrand and co. at Nightmare Armor Studios aren't just hardcore gamers, they also make hardware. Like this life-sized replica of *Halo* cover model Master Chief's armor. Go now, if you want to order your own, or at least to pick up a pair of calf sections.

www.rockstargames.com
Oh so you've heard of Rockstar, already? But did you know that their unusually stylish website hosts such non-*GTA* related diversions as the Rhymerator 1.0, acerbic fortune cookies, and *A Short History of tha Yuppie*? Maybe you didn't. Now you do.

ON THE DL

Downloadable goodness you can grab from Xbox Live

Featured Downloads...

Midtown Madness 3

Download: Car Pack #1, Track pack #1
Why it's cool: Nothing screams "fun" like a fuel-injected dumpster
Welcome to Obviousville: "We wanted to offer more options to *Midtown Madness 3* so adding more vehicles and tracks was a natural choice," Product Manager Adam Kovach says.

NBA Jam

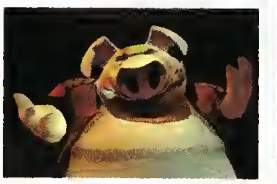
Download: Halloween Team
Why it's cool: Hardball horror? It's just wacky enough to work.
Offensive Team: "Take Mummy, Witch, and Nightmare on the court to do battle against the current NBA teams (and the unlockable teams)." —Acclaim Press Release

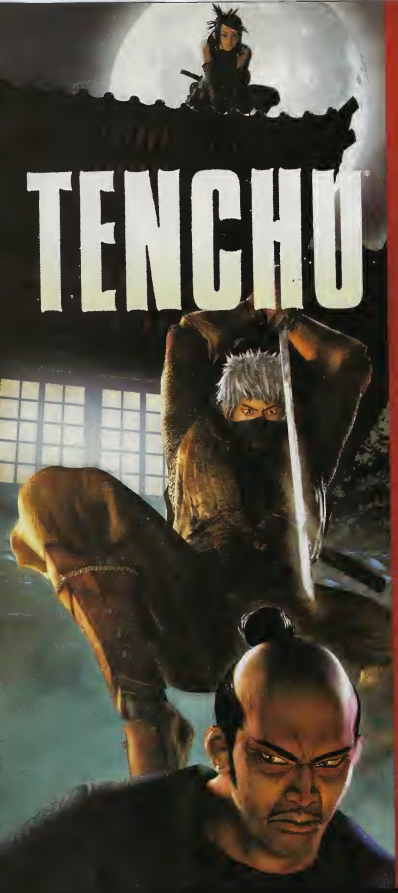
Available Now...

• *Crimson Skies: High Road to Revenge*: [illegible]e content includes the new plane (the [illegible] and the Caverns multiplayer map.
• *Dance Dance Revolution Ultramix*: Song pack[illegible]e #1 now available to download [illegible]5. Includes tracks by: dj TAKA, Naoki, a[illegible] Mr. T with Motoaki.
• *Links 2004*: Hawa[illegible]'s 7,263-yard, par 73 Kapalua Plante[illegible]n course now available.A new course for *Links 2004* will be available every two or three months.
• *Midtown Madness 3*: October saw the release of Car Pack #1, which included Ambassador, a 1940s era luxury car, Shopper, a shopping cart with a motor and R4000, a modern sports coupe. In November, the first of two track packs became available, featuring 20 tracks each. Each pack, the first set in Washington, D.C. and the second in Paris, will contain 10 Blitz tracks and 10 Checkpoint tracks.
• *Secret Weapons Over Normandy*: A new fighter, The Kawasaki Ki-61 Hien, and a new single-player mission, Last Chance, are now available. Also: a new camouflage skin for the Betty bomber.
• *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Island Thunder*: New missions: "Oil Refinery," "Beach Mission," and "Ghost Town" are up for grabs. Also: MP Map Mission Pack, Train Depot, and Aurora Missions.
• *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3*: A new multiplayer map set at a carnival now available for download.
• *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell*: The Vselka Submarine and Vselka Infiltration levels are now available.
• *Xbox Music Mixer*: Four new *Xbox Music Mixer* karaoke song bundles are now available for download, and more are soon to follow. They come at a price of $9.99 per bundle, each containing five tracks. Currently available bundles include Alternative Rock Vol. 1, Best of '80s Pop Vol. 1, Best of '90s Rock Vol. 1, Children's Vol. 1, Christmas Vol. 1, Classic Rock '70s Vol. 1, Country Female Vol. 1, Country Male Vol. 1, and Karaoke Classics Vol. 1 and 2.

Beyond Down & Load...

Although not a typical "content download" enabled title, *Beyond Good & Evil* contains a few interesting online features. By pointing a Web browser to www.beyondgoodevil.com, experienced players are given the option of entering the restricted "Darkroom" area, by using a special completion code given in the save-game section of the title. This code is a record of the player's performance that they may use to compare game stats with the rest of the world and unlock new features both online and within the game, like the multiplayer puck minigame.





When evil reemerges, so must those who silence it.

RETURN FROM DARKNESS™

Stealth ninja action on Xbox® featuring Xbox *Live*™. Coming March 2004.

Master daring new stealth attacks in 11 breathtaking levels using over 20 authentic ninja tools and weapons.

Take on enemies with a friend in co-op mode or go head-to-head in death matches online via Xbox *Live*.™

Discover exclusive Xbox® features, from unique single-player maps to new abilities, tools, combos and characters.

Live by honor. Kill by stealth.

www.returnfromdarkness.com

MATURE 17+ M — Blood and Gore, Intense Violence — ESRB

XBOX LIVE

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ACTIVISION.

activision.com

Showdown: LoW
New old-school wrestling

Acclaim's first two *Legends of Wrestling* games lacked only one thing: a legendary quality. Featuring a host of cool wrestlers such as Bruno Sammartino, Bob Backlund, "Superstar" Billy Graham, and Hulk Hogan, the *Legend* games offered a lot in the way of personality, but little in the way of polish. With a complicated combination and reverse system and awkward wrestler movements, the two games never won a hardcore following.

Now, Acclaim brings a new look to its old series with *Showdown: Legends of Wrestling*, which features more than 70 old-school wrasslin' superstars such as the Ultimate Warrior, Sting, Randy "Macho Man" Savage, "The American Dream" Dusty Rhodes, and Jake "The Snake" Roberts. A new grappling system has been created, one Acclaim has dubbed "Ready to Brawl" for its ease of use.

Showdown also threatens to include all the modes and matches the big boys do: steel cage brawls, battle royales, elimination bouts, and dances of the three- and four-way variety. Popular wrestler Brett "The Hitman" Hart adds his likeness and voice for the game's tutorial, and players will be able to reenact classic matches in classic arenas. *Showdown* drops the hammer in April.

SAVAGE SHOWDOWN

Snap into *Xbox Nation*'s beefiest, spiciest, most nitrate-laden interview ever!

Whether he's extolling the virtues of jerked, salted meat products ("Snap into a Slim Jim!"), dropping phat rage, or trying the smack down on some pencil-necked geeks, Randy "Macho Man" Savage remains a larger-than-life figure.

Macho Man's career has led him from the wrasslin' ring to the recording studio, where he's mounted a career as a rap artist whose first CD, *Be A Man*, was released in September 2003 (on sale at machoman.com).

Now, the sunglasses-clad superstar enters the videogame arena as spokesman for Acclaim's *Showdown: Legends of Wrestling*, the much anticipated game slated to hit in April 2004. Xbox Nation sat down with Savage to find out—oochhh yeeeaaahl—what makes this legend tick.

***Xbox Nation:* Have you ever actually eaten—or snapped into—a Slim Jim? Describe the taste.**
Randy "Macho Man" Savage: Oh yes I have! If you need a little beef or spices, grab a Slim Jim. [The taste is] that undescribable X-factor.

***XBN:* What sort of wine goes well with a Slim Jim?**
Savage: I quit drinking two years ago, so I don't know.

***XBN:* Tell us about Showdown: Legends of Wrestling. Omit no earthly detail.**
Savage: I'm excited to be a part of it. I'm working with the development team on my signature moves and taunts. They really know what I do and are working to make my character as much like me as possible. It's got 72 of the greatest wrestlers ever, and it'll be the greatest thing in the world for the fans to see how wrestlers from different eras stack up against each other.

***XBN:* Has Acclaim made you the toughest wrestler in the game?**
Savage: Oh yeah, I'm the toughest, definitely! One "Ohhh yeaahh!" and a flying elbow from the top rope, and the Macho Man will be on top!

***XBN:* You've publicly challenged Hulk Hogan to a fight. Why?**
Savage: Well, he disrespected my family and me in public, so I called him out.

***XBN:* Do you think he'll rise to the challenge?**
Savage: Nope.

***XBN:* Who's the greatest wrestler you ever faced in the ring?**
Savage: Andre the Giant. Just pure size and attitude and strength. He either liked you or he didn't like you, and he didn't like me, so he let me have it!

***XBN:* What do you feel was your greatest match ever?**
Savage: Oh, there are so many great moments, but one of the best was at the Pontiac Silverdome, the sold-out show that set the attendance record. The rush going down the aisle coming in was amazing—it gave me that feeling in my stomach that I got when I first rapped—the feeling that something good was gonna happen.

***XBN:* Speaking of rapping, what motivated you to record a rap album?**
Savage: I've loved music all my life—I was a rock and roller growing up, and when hip-hop came around I really got into it. Last year I got the opportunity to do a rap record, and it's just been great. I love rap, and some of my songs have a rock edge. It's just a cool opportunity.

***XBN:* What do you rap about?**
Savage: I rap about everything, my career, I even did a love song. I do club songs, raise-the-roof songs.

***XBN:* Settle the argument once and for all: East Coast or West Coast?**
Savage: [Laughing] Right in the middle! I got respect for all the rappers!

Crime Does Pay...Doesn't it?

Rockstar Games simply can't stay out of the legal limelight. One Mark Gallagher is seeking damages from its Scotland arm, claiming the GTA series' steals from his own *Crime Inc.*

Stealth Release at Sundance

On Jan. 18, Ubisoft premiered *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow* at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, UT, marking a new—albeit questionable—precedent for debuting games.

Online Foes, Real World Woes

A South Korean boy stole $16,000 from his father to pay for items from the hugely popular online game *Lineage*. Nearly 1 in 4 South Koreans have high-speed Internet access.

HELLBOY
4.2.04
REVOLUTION STUDIOS PRESENTS A LAWRENCE GORDON PRODUCTION IN ASSOCIATION WITH DARK HORSE ENTERTAINMENT A FILM BY GUILLERMO DEL TORO "HELLBOY"
RON PERLMAN SELMA BLAIR JEFFREY TAMBOR KAREL RODEN RUPERT EVANS AND JOHN HURT
MUSIC BY MARCO BELTRAMI CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCER MIKE MIGNOLA DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY PATRICK PALMER
BASED UPON THE DARK HORSE COMIC CREATED BY MIKE MIGNOLA
SCREENPLAY BY GUILLERMO DEL TORO
PRODUCED BY LAWRENCE GORDON MIKE RICHARDSON LLOYD LEVIN
DIRECTED BY GUILLERMO DEL TORO
REVOLUTION STUDIOS
THIS FILM IS NOT YET RATED.
FOR FUTURE INFO GO TO FILMRATINGS.COM
Hellboy-Movie.com
LAWRENCE GORDON PRODUCTIONS
COLUMBIA PICTURES

BALLS APLENTY!

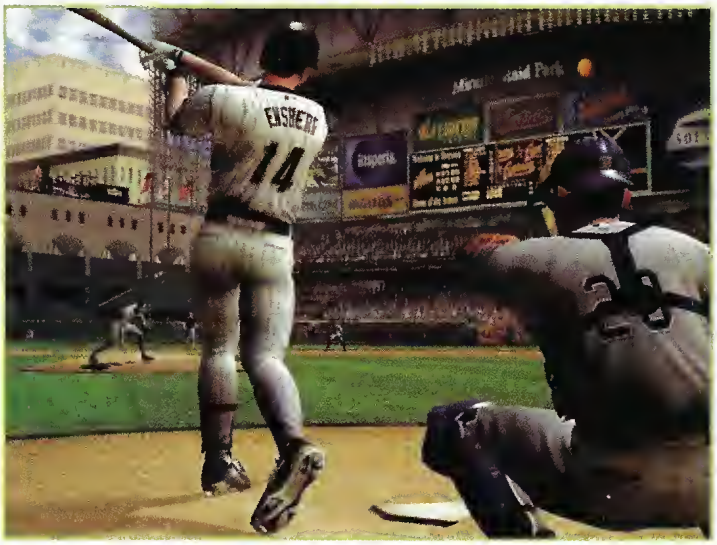
Last year's crop of baseball games for the Xbox was an embarrassment of riches, with no less than six titles for fans of the gentleman's game to choose from. This year's lineup is a bit leaner—thanks in part to one major player not entering the field (see sidebar)—but no less impressive. Sporting some serious love of the game, 2004's playoff contenders should make for some tough choices as to which title to go with to satisfy your stickball needs.

MVP BASEBALL 2004 (EA SPORTS)

Most valuable without online play, that is....

Last year's entry from EA Sports was the first under the new *MVP Baseball* moniker and signaled an end to the *Triple Play* franchise (which was actually killed off a while ago). While not the best game of last year, *MVP* was the most promising, with some killer graphics and solid gameplay. Another year of polish has resulted in a game that should not only give *ESPN* a run for its money, but could be one of the most innovative baseball games in a long time.

The most important thing for any baseball game, or any sports game for that matter, is recreating the "feel" of the game. *MVP* does an outstanding job of that by giving gamers more control over their players. Fielders now have throw meters to control how hard and accurately they throw. Pitchers do too, so pitching is more complicated than just picking a pitch and a zone and then hitting a button. You'll have to control your throw almost like a golf swing to be effective.



It's just not as poetic to to say, "There was no joy in Minute Maid Park. Mighty Ensberg had struck out." It's even less poetic to wax about the Tao in the Minute Maid Park bleachers.

Hitting was a major concern for the developers, and the improved swing mechanics and ball physics feel closer to the real thing than ever before. None of this power swing versus regular swing (as if real-world players do that), but you will have control over where you swing in the zone, and the results are utterly believable.

As with all of EA's sports games, the level of refinement and access to licenses is top notch. Not only does *MVP* sport some classic Hall of Fame players, but it also has the full AA and AAA minor league licenses (although not their parks—a minor bummer), something never seen in a baseball videogame before. So you'll get to play with your team's top real-world prospects as well as the superstars.

The game looks outstanding too, with lifelike facemapping and realistic animations that are keyed in to the variations on where the ball is moving. The first basemen alone will show all kinds of jumps and stretches and scoops to recover poorly thrown balls.

Cheap though he was, the headless first baseman made a lot of fielding errors.

Once again, as with all of EA Sports' games, *MVP Baseball* will be the one to beat this spring.

THE MUDVILLE FOUR?

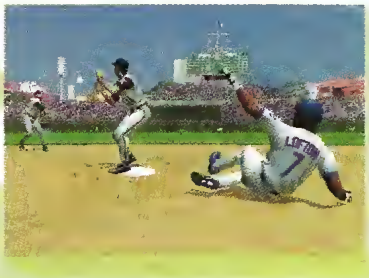
	MVP BASEBALL 2004	ALL-STAR BASEBALL 2005
ONLINE?	No	Yes
COMMENTATORS	Mike Krukow & Duane Kuiper	Steve Lyons & Thom Brennaman
RELEASE DATE	April	March
COVER BOY	Albert Pujols	Derek Jeter
CLASSIC PLAYERS	Yes	Yes
FRANCHISE MODE	Yes	Yes
MOST EXCITING FEATURE	AAA & AA Minor League Licenses	FielderCam

ALL-STAR BASEBALL 2005 (ACCLAIM)

Everything old is still old, but presented as if it's new again....

All-Star Baseball is back, with many of the same gameplay shortcomings as last year, but with some bright new graphics (the specular highlights are nice) and new modes such as the *This Week In Baseball* Challenge, which unlocks media from the show when [illegible]

scenarios. Also new is the FielderCam, which puts the view behind the players as they go after the ball, but just because no one's done it before doesn't necessarily make it innovative. The [illegible] franchise mode also returns [illegible] It's not a huge leap over last year, but a few new tweaks here and there.



Out of the plate
The big chill from Microsoft

[illegible] as [illegible] Microsoft's [illegible] game of 2003, [illegible] was way inside. A miss and a mile, if you will. So one can understand why the mega-fat Microsoft had [illegible] the second-year [illegible] in the 2K3 [illegible] was an odd decision by [illegible] toward [illegible] Maddenizing with [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] rather than [illegible] a great baseball game in [illegible] Sadly, however, Microsoft will not be releasing *High Heat* or *Inside* anything this [illegible] Rumour is it's taking [illegible] on the game and will come out swinging with [illegible]

ESPN MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL (VISUAL CONCEPTS)

The Queen Mother of all baseball games?

Last year's *World Series Baseball* from Visual Concepts has morphed into *ESPN Major League Baseball*. Don't worry, everything that helped make that game the front-runner of 2003 baseball videogames remains largely untinkered with. Great graphics, incredibly deep career and general manager modes, and seamless and professional ESPN-culled graphics are becoming a hallmark of the series.

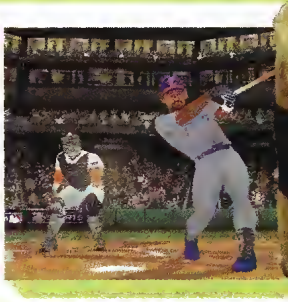
The big additions to *ESPN Major League Baseball* this year are the addition of ESPN announcers Jon Miller and Karl Ravech (hosts of *Baseball Tonight*), who'll lend their well-known voices to the game. Developer Blue Shift has also implemented some new features to make playing the game more like watching one on ESPN.

MLB SLUGFEST: LOADED (MIDWAY)

It's like baseball, only with hydrocephalic children and horses

Midway returns this year with its [illegible] line of wildly over-the-top arcade sports games, including its baseball franchise *MLB Slugfest: Loaded*. Here, the subtitle refers to the features "loaded" into the [illegible] major [illegible]

Baseball Mogul engine to drive the franchise mode. It's a bizarre pairing, not on the peanut butter-and-chocolate level, but more on the nuts-and-dum (together at last!) level. It's kind of like putting a tweed jacket on Britney Spears. (At least there are the flaming [illegible]



ESPN MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL	MLB SLUGFEST: LOADED
Yes	Yes
Jon Miller & Karl Ravech	Tim Kitzrow & Jim Shorts
March	June
Jason Giambi	Jim Edmonds
No	No
Yes	Yes
ESPN Presentation	Flaming Balls

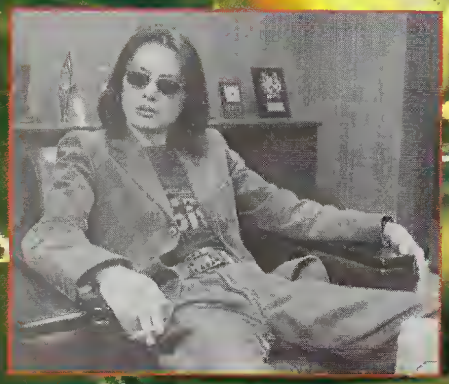
Photography: Ezra Shaw

POP QUIZ

Gaming genius or merely the queen of fighters? *XBN* puts *Ninja Gaiden*'s Tomonobu Itagaki to the test.

Each issue, *Xbox Nation* pops the quiz on an Xbox game designer to find out just how much (or little) they actually know about games. The premise of our test is simple: We show our guest a series of in-game screenshots and let him or her tell us not only the name of the game, but also its relevance to their own body of work. By discussing various external influences, we hope to gain insight into their own creative processes.

In anticipation of our *Ninja Gaiden* review next issue, we've tracked down Tomonobu Itagaki, Tecmo's bread-and-butter action-game designer, to divulge ancient ninjitsu secrets, as well as a thing or two about this little hobby of ours called "videogames."



Tomonobu Itagaki

Title:
Executive Officer & General Manager, Team Ninja

Current Xbox projects:
Ninja Gaiden, *Dead or Alive Ultimate*

Past Projects: *Dead or Alive* (Arcade, PS1, Saturn), *Dead or Alive 2* (Dreamcast, PS2), *Dead or Alive 2: Hardcore* (PS2), *Dead or Alive 3* (Xbox), *Dead or Alive: Xtreme Beach Volleyball* (Xbox)

1 Tomonobu Itagaki: [Instantly recognizing the game] This is the first *Ninja Gaiden*.

***Xbox Nation:* So what is it about this arcade classic that inspired you to revive the franchise on Xbox?**
Itagaki: Just so you know, I had no intentions of making a sequel to the *Ninja Gaiden* series or reviving the franchise. I wanted to make an action game, and it just so happens that we have this ninja license, so I decided to use this franchise to fulfill my action-game desire.

***XBN:* Does *Ninja Gaiden* on Xbox continue the story of the old 8-bit games?**
Itagaki: The story will be completely new this time. I'm not so certain it's even a good idea for me to work off of a story that was written by someone else, even though the rights are owned by Tecmo. When I worked on the first *Dead or Alive*, I had to get permission from the then-president of Tecmo (now a chairman of the company) to use Ryu Hayabusa as a character in the game. The requirement, of course, was that I had to understand what the character was all about, so I had to do a bit of research on my own.

2 ***XBN:* Well, here's another ninja game. Maybe this is one of your competitors?**
Itagaki: Ah, this is Sega's game, *Shinobi*. You know, my game also features a helicopter, but I'm not so sure about trying to make players slash the helicopter with their katana [laughs]. So, in *Ninja Gaiden*, Hayabusa is equipped with a special weapon to shoot down stuff like helicopters. Make sense? Good. I didn't mean to copy their idea at all, I'm just a military freak. I spend a lot of time and energy to make sure that the detail is there for the hardware.

***XBN:* We see a lot of similarity with the styles between *Shinobi* and *Ninja Gaiden*, not so much in the style of the graphics but in the quick movements, dashing attacks, and the wall running that's featured prominently in both games.**
Itagaki: I'm a big fan of [an old *Shinobi* prequel] *Shadow Dancer*, so I went out and bought it. I played up to, like, the fourth stage or so and pretty much figured out the system. In *Shinobi*, the gameplay is that you have to slash a bunch of locked-on enemies in order to produce cool-looking results at the end—as some sort of reward. I disagree with this premise. I think cool-looking results should come out of moment-to-moment action sequences, where the player is given complete control. Personally, I enjoyed [*Shinobi*'s gameplay] system because I like cheesy Japanese drama action. But as a game designer for Tecmo, I don't think it's what people want.

3 Itagaki: Eh? What's this...*Otogi*?

***XBN:* Yes, by From Software. It's the first Japanese Xbox game to really take advantage of the system's powerful hardware.**
Itagaki: I really respect the audio in this game. And

1

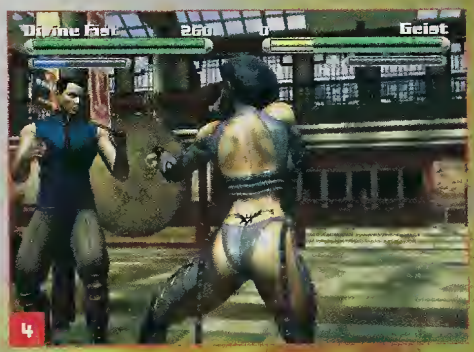
Ninja Gaiden
Publisher: Tecmo
Developer: Tecmo
Platform: Arcade
Year: 1986

2

Shinobi
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Overworks
Platform: PlayStation 2
Year: 2002

3

Otogi: Myth of Demons
Publisher: Sega
Developer: From Software
Platform: Xbox
Year: 2003



4

Tao Feng: Fist of the Lotus
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Studio Gigante
Platform: Xbox
Year: 2003

Now it seems the Japanese have narrowed their focus to action games, RPGs, and driving games.

I'm not just saying it to be polite. The sound design in this game is superb. The theme of *Otogi* was "destruction," just as it was in *Rygar* (PS2), by my Tecmo colleague Kanematsu. But I told him that *Otogi* probably lives up to its theme much better than *Rygar*, which kind of pissed him off [laughs].

***XBN*: It seems that the best action games out of Japan aren't so much 3D shooters, as much as they are melee-style fighting games. Is it because the Japanese have had so much experience making these types of games, dating back to arcade titles in the '80s?**
Itagaki: Well, these sort of hand-to-hand-style action games are important to the Japanese game development community. We used to be good at shooters, but now it seems the Japanese have narrowed their focus to action games, RPGs, and driving games.
XBN: Why haven't first-person shooters caught on in Japan, yet they're wildly popular here in the U.S.?
Itagaki: The problem is that Japanese gamers just haven't really been exposed to the notion that FPS titles are indeed fun to play. Another thing is that, when print magazines cover these titles, it's hard to convey the excitement of an FPS game with just screenshots—without readers seeing these games in motion. That may be another reason why Japanese consumers just don't get it.

4 **Itagaki:** [Straining to recall] I don't think I've seen this game before.

***XBN*: It's *Tao Feng: Fist of the Lotus*.**
Itagaki: From the name of the game, shouldn't it be a Chinese-themed action game or something....
***XBN*: Let's just say they're borrowing liberally from Chinese kung fu clichés.**
Itagaki: [Laughs] That was their original intention, to get an Asian feel I guess.

***XBN*: So what do you think of U.S.-developed fighting games?**
Itagaki: Well, I haven't had a chance to play the latest *Mortal Kombat*, but as far as American fighting games are concerned, I wish the developers would pay more attention to movement and gameplay. I think technically, they look pretty good. But in a fighting game, the most important element is gameplay—and if it's lacking, then I'm not interested in it, no matter how good the graphics are. In all honesty, good fighting games are very difficult to make. I happen to have eight years worth of fighting-game experience I can tap into as a resource for *Dead or Alive 4*. But if I were to start from scratch on *DOA*, let's say, I think I'd go nuts.

5 **Itagaki:** Oh, I like this one. It's *Virtua Fighter 2*, a very good game.

***XBN*: Have you played *Virtua Fighter 4*?**
Itagaki: Yes. For about 30 minutes [laughs].

***XBN*: Well, the reason why we're showing you a screenshot of *VF2* and not *VF4* is because *Dead or Alive* has a lot in common, in terms of look and feel, to *VF2*. Was this game a great influence on you during the development of *DOA*?**
Itagaki: Influence aside, without *Virtua Fighter*, there couldn't have been *DOA*. It's that simple. Sega and AM2 didn't give me any technical help or lend me their code or anything like that—we made *DOA* from scratch, but *VF2* was definitely the pioneer. Because of this game, we now have *DOA* and *Tekken*. I spent a lot of time playing *VF2*. I like Sarah and Pai.

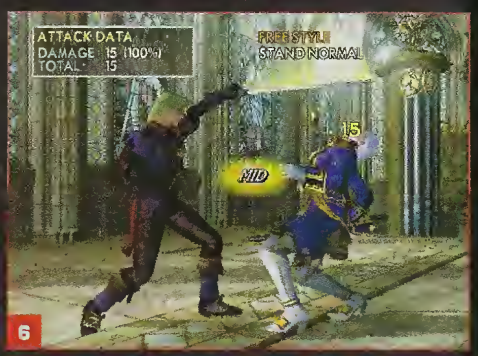
***XBN*: Have you ever expressed these sentiments to [*VF2* creator] Yu Suzuki?**
Itagaki: We've only had one conversation, and it wasn't really about his game. We talked more about the technology behind 3D fighters. At the time, I was struggling with getting our punches to look smooth and realistic in *DOA*, so I looked up Suzuki to consult him on the matter. To show respect to him, I gave him a detailed write-up of my problem, which was around three or four pages, and took it with me to visit him. Since it was the first time meeting him, I was a bit nervous, and right off the bat, Suzuki told me he didn't like reading papers. [Laughs]

***XBN*: So did he hook you up?**
Itagaki: Well, he didn't give me any real direct answers, but he did tell me one thing, probably unintentionally. He told me that what I'm doing, technologically anyway, is completely different than what he's working on. When he said that, I know he didn't base it on any actual facts, since I didn't give him any real data. But when someone with the stature of Yu Suzuki tells me that we're doing two different things, technologically, it really pushed me to find the solution on my own. What's important in development is knowing whether something is possible. Once you

5

Virtua Fighter 2

Publisher: Sega
Developer: AM2
Platform: Arcade, Sega Saturn
Year: 1994



6

Soul Calibur 2

Publisher: Namco
Developer: Namco
Platform: GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox
Year: 2003

know that, then the rest is easy.

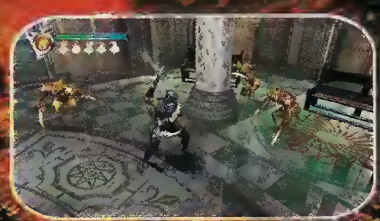
6 Itagaki: *Soul Calibur 2*. A close friend of mine is on the development team for this game.

***XBN*: Despite *DOA2*'s graphical superiority, many still believe that *Calibur* has the upper hand when it comes to gameplay.**
Itagaki: In terms of gameplay or game systems, just because one is more complicated than the other doesn't necessarily make it better. My goal with *DOA* is for someone to have fun with the game, even when they don't thoroughly understand the deeper gameplay. Hardcore gamers are always eager to master a fighting-game system, so it's quite easy to create a game that's balanced for hardcore gamers, since they actually understand subtleties and differences between moves. To satisfy them, all you need to do is to constantly tweak and refine the gameplay so it's intricately perfect. But in balancing the game, you inevitably have to cut out a lot of cool, but unfair moves, making the game much less appealing for casual gamers. I want to focus on the emotional aspects of two different moves that may have the same speed or damage on paper, but have two totally different visual impacts. A lot of fighting games lack this sort of graphical drama. If you focus only on specs and numbers, you're going to chase away casual gamers.

***XBN*: So with the *Dead or Alive* series, your goal is to make a fighting game for casual gamers?**
Itagaki: Yes. I have no problems with *Soul Calibur* satisfying the existing hardcore fighting crowd, but I want *DOA* to appeal to more than just hardcore fighting fans.

***XBN*: Maybe *DOA Ultimate*, with its Xbox Live support, will do the trick then?**
Itagaki: Well, actually, *DOA Ultimate* is a game for the hardcore crowd. We've done a lot of subtle tweaks and balances to the game system that fans of the series will instantly recognize. ■

Vengeance... is a dish better served hot.



This time it's personal... Ryu Hayabusa, the deadly and feared ninja assassin, is out for blood after his clan is massacred by the evil Vigor Empire. Vowing to seek revenge on those that betrayed him, he sets off on an action-packed adventure where the lines between good and evil are blurred and all that he believes in will be tested.

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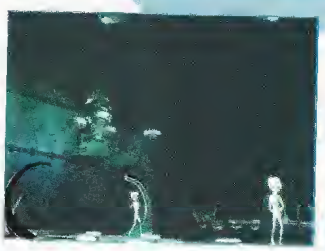
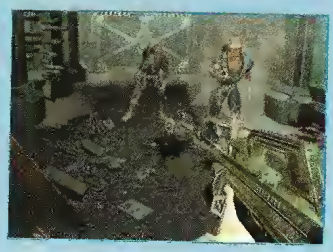




AREA 51

Shhhh... It's a *secret* installation!

You can't fault Midway for playing it safe. Case in point: It's remake of the seminal *SpyHunter* was deemed a worthwhile effort largely due to the update's adherence to the 2D original's winning ways. And so it goes with yet another arcade update: the ultrapopular light gun franchise *Area 51*, which has been reborn as—no surprises here—a first-person shooter.

As man-on-a-mission Lt. Nick Cross, the player is tasked with infiltrating the U.S. governments' worst kept secret: the titular Area 51, a locale steeped in UFO lore and quite possibly home to an extra-terrestrial threat. The twist? During his investigation, Cross becomes infected with a "biological mutagen," transforming him into something more than human, and—conveniently—empowering him with supernatural abilities. So, it's up to the player to save not only all of humanity as a whole, but Cross' life as well.

Naturally, splitscreen, system link, and Xbox Live multiplayer modes are scheduled for inclusion, as are all the FPS standards: eight sprawling levels include exploration, puzzle solving, secrets, and ample opportunity for alien annihilation. Prolific film and TV creature designer Stan Winston has been signed to lend his 30-plus years of experience to the game's assorted alien monstrosities, while composer, producer, and Nine Inch Nails founding member Chris Vrenna will lend his abilities to the score.

Scheduled for a Q4 release, the Inevitable-developed game is being pitched by Midway as no less than "the ultimate 'sci-fi meets government cover-up' first-person shooter"—an honor still held by 1998's *Half-Life*. In any case, the perpetual popularity of so many similar shoot 'em ups suggest that—for now, at least—one more solid sci-fi shooter is always a welcome thing.

Ed Fries Moves On

Key Xbox player resigns

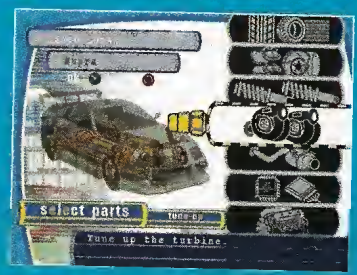
Vice President of Games Publishing for Microsoft Game Studios Ed Fries resigned on January 13, after working at the company for 18 years. A key player in Microsoft's strategy in both the PC and Xbox fields, Fries is widely credited with courting the support of an array of third-party developers in North America, Europe, and Japan for Xbox, and also with spearheading the acquisition of Bungie Studios, Ensemble Studios, and Rare Ltd. His successor, Shane Kim, served as chief operating officer of MGS, and will act as studio head until a replacement is found.

AUTO MODELLISTA

It's a second lap for Capcom's Cel-shaded carfest

With an animated aesthetic that would look right at home in some swanky nightclub, Capcom's cel-shaded paean to car culture is sure to turn heads. Autophiles' favorite marquees are represented here—or, at least, the aftermarket friendly sorts—including Honda, Mazda, and Nissan. Naturally, customization is key: Players can mix and match the usual hardware choices, and also choose from more cosmetic add-ons, including decals drawn from Capcom's considerable array of popular characters.

As of now, there's little doubt that *Auto Modellista* is model-esque: It's bright and beautiful, and it conveys a sense of speed that more 'realistic' racers simply can't capture. But it's what's under the hood that counts: Some will recall that the original *Modellista* shipped for PS2 last year to considerable criticism for its floaty handling and teeth-grindingly slippery controls. Time (and a tune-up) will be needed to get this Xbox port truly ready for the races.



Rainbow SiXXX 3

Credit Tony Ashcroft with leveraging *Rainbow Six 3* to his advantage. The entrepreneurial Texan snagged an unclaimed URL shown in-game and filled it with links to adult Web sites.

Tork back from the dead?

Ubisoft recently purchased Tiwak, developer of the canceled Xbox game *Tork*, prompting no one to wonder if either company would be interested in resurrecting the project.

Yup, Star Wars is *still* popular

Online game rental service GameFly.com announced its top rentals for 2004. *KOTOR* was ranked No. 1 for all consoles, with Xbox games taking eight of the top 10 slots.

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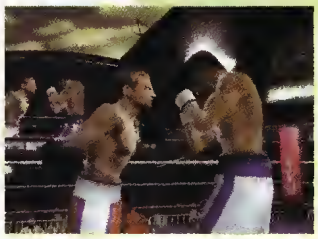


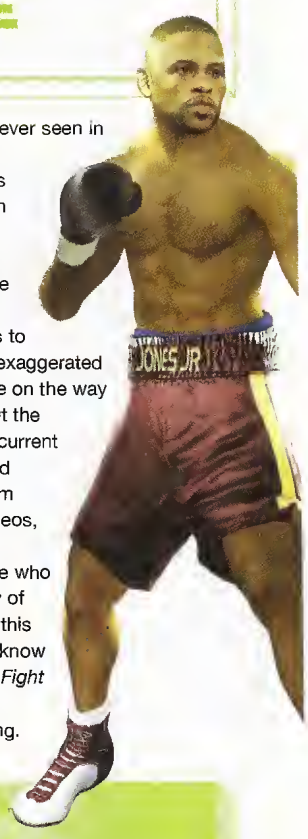
PUNCH-DRUNK LOVE

EA's *Fight Night 2004* will knock you out

Over the past several years, EA Sports has gone a few rounds with various incarnations of its *Knockout Kings* series, each time pledging to change the face of digital boxing. But for all of its permutations and lofty promises, the series has always had a glass jaw—namely, an overwhelming emphasis on mindless button mashing.

Taking a cue from the analog-based "Freestyle Control" in its *NBA Live* series, EA has employed dual-analog controls in its newest boxing title, *Fight Night 2004*. Essentially, the left thumbstick controls your movement while the right controls your punches. Make a half-circle with the right thumbstick, starting from the bottom and moving it up and to the right, and you just cracked someone with an right-handed uppercut. Make a quarter circle to the left and up and you've thrown a left jab. Using the shoulder buttons to block, bob, and weave, it's essentially the most elegant interface we've ever seen in a boxing game.

The emphasis here is clearly on arcade-style pugilism, as evidenced by the fact that every knockout seems to include several exaggerated shots to the face on the way down. EA has hit the jackpot with its current formula (polished controls, Def Jam soundtrack/cameos, and fast-paced gameplay); those who have played any of its other games this year essentially know what to expect. *Fight Night 2004* hits streets this spring.



THIEF: DEADLY SHADOWS

Eidos serves a delicious hard-boiled yegg

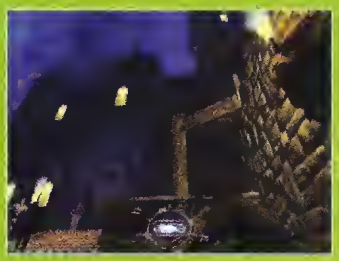
Lovable black-clad rogue Garrett will steal your heart. Then, most likely, he'll shiv you in the back before you can scream, loot your corpse, pick it up, and dump it in a darkened corner. As Garrett, in either the first-person perspective or the third, it's your job to line your pockets while performing secret missions. *Deadly Shadows* marks the third game in the popular PC series and the first iteration of *Thief* to make it to Xbox.

Ion Storm's director Warren Spector refers to *Shadows* as "the razor-sharp focus game." Spector says, "It's all about being tense. Its like you're tightrope walking." Garrett is all-too-human. The guards he faces are more powerful than he is. Stealth and deception stand as fine—and perhaps the only—ways to avoid an unpleasant end. To emphasize the tension, the game's guards continually chat to one another or themselves, providing a running, expository-laden commentary for players. Guards see, hear, and are aware of their surroundings; the A.I. allows them to become suspicious in graded levels.

Ion Storm's director Warren Spector refers to *Deadly Shadows* as "the razor-sharp-focus game"

A gem on the gameplay screen serves as *Shadow*'s only artifice, dimming when Garrett steps into darkness and brightening when he's in the light, indicating the quality of a prospective hiding spot.

Project Director Randy Smith showed off the game recently at Ion Storm's Texas headquarters, taking Garrett through a large, shadowy castle. Here, the thief used water arrows to douse torches to create shadows, employed a special glove to climb up walls to evade detection, and incapacitated guards with flash grenades that lit the game screen a blinding white. *Shadows*' innards come pilfered straight from Ion Storm's graphically sound and dexterity-challenging *Deus Ex: Invisible War* (whose gameplay and graphic engine it uses), so it's no surprise that it looks and feels a lot like a medieval—and certainly more loot-filled—version of its futuristic predecessor.



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STAR CROSSED

The House That George Built deals the naked truth for *Republic Commando*, *Battlefront*

Words: Greg Orlando **Illustration**: Andre Sibayan

'Tis the season. At LucasArts headquarters in San Rafael, CA., there are presents under the Christmas tree and Admiral Ackbar behind lucite, his great big fish-eyes looking out across the reception room. Without an actor inside the fish-man's suit, Ackbar is immobile, silent, and seems excessively mopey.

Despite the admiral in the translucent trap and some recent bumps on the pavement—notably the cancellation of *Full Throttle*'s sequel and the resignation of company president Simon Jeffries—it's hardly a *Howard the Duck*–style stinkeroo of a holiday season for LucasArts. Indeed the company has tidings of great joy for Xbox owners in the form of *Republic Commando* and *Battlefront*, two snazzy new Star Wars–themed titles.

Commando offers first-person shooting and the ability to wreak havoc with a four-man squad. *Battlefront* drops players into multiplayer battles, online and off, with the Empire fighting the Rebels, and the Separatists pitting their might against the Republic. Seeing them in action well before their release may have been the greatest present ever received by a bunch of intellectually shriveled, game-magazine-producing troglodytes.

Ho, ho, ho ....

Goin' Commando

Someone let the dogs of war out.

Dissension within the ranks of the Galactic Republic has festered and bloomed, and a separatist faction under the direction of dark Jedi Darth Sidious and Count Dooku seeks to shatter an enduring peace. It is a time of great danger and greater evil. It is an uncertain time when the only real certainty is that it is time for action.

Every piece of the action, **every laser flash and bit of naked aggression** is seen through the commando's visor.

It is time to send in the clones.

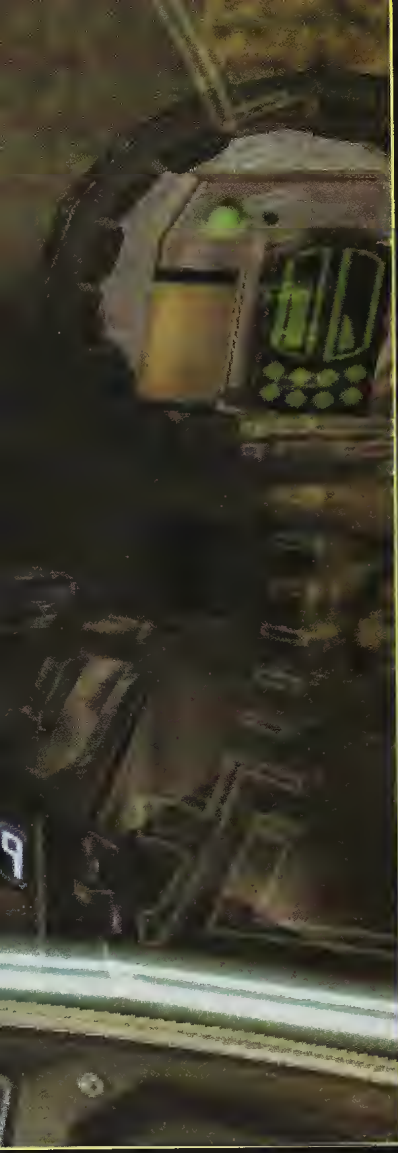
Set amid the turbulence of the Clone Wars, LucasArts' Xbox-exclusive first-person shooter *Republic Commando* brings the genetic duplicates in spades, and with them, a host of four-man, squad-based special operations meant to illuminate a seldom-seen portion of the Star Wars universe.

"We're not making a hero game," *Commando*'s director Tim Longo says. In *Commando*'s world, there are no Jedi. There are no Han Solos performing dramatic rescues here, nor any Lando Calrissians leading desperate charges against an overwhelming foe in a fight to determine the fate of the universe. Longo likens the game's protagonist, a commando in the Grand Army of the Republic, to a special operative—one who performs missions falling somewhere under the radar and far removed from the compound adjective "high profile."

"We estimate there are about 10,000 commandos [in the Republic's clone army]," Longo says. "They're specially trained with unique attributes, unique equipment. They're dropped behind enemy lines and left to their own devices to work in squads like Navy SEALs do. They might not see any support for weeks at a time, so they need to improvise, just like an Army Ranger or Navy SEAL."

Commando takes place in the time between *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* and the as-yet-untitled third prequel. Instead of saving the universe and singlehandedly winning the Clone Wars, the player and his three squadmates tackle missions meant to pave the way for invasion forces, cripple enemy installations, and provide support. It's a quiet war these commandos fight, and their clandestine operations pave the way for LucasArts to provide a darker, grittier experience.

The game never deviates from its first-person perspective, and every piece of the action, every laser flash and bit of naked aggression is seen through the commando's visor. Mission briefings don't yank players from the great war; when the Wookiee homeworld Kashyyyk comes under fire, the commandos rush in on gunships and a holographic clone adviser gives the four-man squad its marching orders as huge trees whip by in the background, explosions bracket



Some of the game's missions will involve hostage rescue, infiltration/data retrieval, assassination, assault, sabotage, and reconnaissance. Enemies include Trandoshans, buglike Geonosians, and Separatists droids of all sorts.

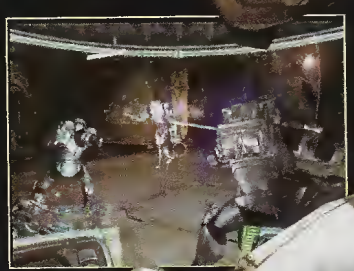
the assaulting craft, and hell itself comes to claim some clones when their ships disintegrate.

When the commandos touch down, it's in a hotter-than-hell zone. Huge armor-wearing Wookiees, big enough to make their comrade Chewbacca look like a hairy Mugsy Bogues in comparison, begin to spread out across a cavernous room illuminated by flickering lights and laser fire. With a simple point-and-click, each of the three nonplayer commandos receives an order to move to a specific spot. The commandos fan out, dodging fire and taking up positions behind a series of crates in different corners to create a deadly triangulated fire. Separatist foes, lizardlike Trandoshans, fall under a withering blaze. Taps on the Xbox controller's D-pad issue commands to the entire squad: Form up on the leader and protect him; spread out, seek, and destroy; secure and defend a position.

"You can control their A.I. [determining] if they're passive or aggressive, and you've got these items in the world you can interact with. How well you manipulate those items will determine whether you're successful or not," the game's producer Steve Matulac says. When the commandos approach an imposing metal door, it's time for an object lesson in item manipulation, as well as a fine time to make a decision.

"Identify situation: Magnetically sealed door," text on the commando's visor flashes.

"The gameplay requires me to get through this door," Matt Fillbrandt, *Commando*'s associate producer says. "I have two different maneuvers I can do. I can do a door breach where the commandos will blow the door and do a surgical strike through the doorway. Or, I have the option to do a more stealthy move where I can have one guy hack into the door." Hacking



The commandos prepare for a door breach. Once the door explodes, the squad will rush in and attempt to clear the room of enemies. For a more quiet and stealthy experience, door panels can also be hacked by a single soldier.

Turrets enable commandos to lay down some heavy fire. They can be manned by the player or his NPC comrades.

has its uses, but for the purposes of a kick-ass demo, there's only one route to take.

"Delta Squad: Begin door breach!"

"Go, go, go!"

"Placing detonator. Clear!"

In a very neat touch, LucasArts will employ actor Temuera Morrison (Jango Fett in *Attack of the Clones*) and various soundalikes to provide the commandos' voices. The commandos are, after all, Fett's clones. "The idea [behind the soundalikes] is that twins don't exactly sound the same," Matulac says.

Boom. With the door breached and the enemies falling back in surprise, a commando's best friend, the modifiable DC-17M rifle comes into play. On the fly, a commando can swap out parts of the gun to create an antiarmor weapon, a blaster, or a sniper rifle. As with *Halo*, dropped enemy weapons can be picked up and used, but a commando can hold only grenades and two guns. One of the guns has to be the DC-17M.

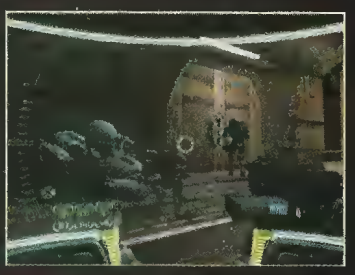
Grenades used against Trandoshans create satisfying explosions and send enemies flying—the bodies bouncing slightly when they hit the ground or ragdolling off of crates. A sniper shot to the leg of a faraway enemy serves as a kill shot; the Trandoshan crumples like the French in World War II. Location-specific damage is on tap, but not yet implemented.

"Lizards spotted!" a commando hisses. Past the initial surprise of the door breach, the enemies begin to dig in, ducking behind boxes and manning gun turrets from which they can spit a deadly hail of fire. In a flash, the battle is joined; two of the player's squadmates assault a gun turret while a third plants a detonator charge to destroy a nearby objective. After a bit, the target goes up most impressively. Empty turrets are quickly filled with live clones, and the room is cleared.

A new directive comes in from the ether: locate and protect a Wookiee general. Trandoshan mercenaries drop down on zip lines from the heavens, and their assault quickly decimates a commando. "Need aid now!" he barks, and an icon on the left-hand side of the gameplay screen bears witness to his depleted energy shields and rapidly vanishing health. The shields, given time, regenerate. Health doesn't, and an incapacitated commando is "dead" until he can be revived by the player or a squadmate.

Further on, enemies come flying down from an overhead walkway, followed by a Wookiee's angry howl. "That must be [the general]. Looks like he doesn't need our help," a commando says. When he first appears on screen, a scripted event shows the brutish general punting one of his foes into, roughly, next week. "The kick is up! It's good!" Matulac notes slyly.

Chatter between the squad



Republic Commando features Trandoshan slavers as well as their mora military-minded brethren, the Trandoshan mercenaries.

members serves to keep the tension levels high even when there are no live enemies present. "Pick that sequencer up!" a commando bellows when a trap is spotted. "Keep your distance," he tells the other clones. "Just in case."

"Wish me luck," the unfortunate trap zapper says before moving forward.

More tense moments follow, and it quickly becomes apparent that *Commando* excels at pushing a frantic pace and tone. Tiny scavenger droids hurl themselves at the clones. If they're successful, they attach themselves, leechlike, to a commando's helmet, disrupting its ability to relay visual information to its wearer. The effect is arresting in both senses of the word; the screen turns green and distorts wildly, a series of vertical lines flash madly on and off. The droids incapacitate their target, and an affected clone's only recourse is to wait for a squadmate to physically remove the parasite.

Danger looms and a bridge beckons. It must be destroyed to complete the mission, and it's here the Separatists bring out the big guns—Super Battle Droids ("They're bastards," Longo quips) and Advanced Spider Droids. Commandos slide into position and the zip of blasters fills the air.

"Quit shooting at me!" Friendly fire accidents can happen to even the best of commandos.

"We can get a clear shot from here!" Antiarmor shells fly at the metal foes.

A commando gets knocked off his feet, but quickly recovers—there's simply no rest for the genetically duplicated. Explosions, gorgeous explosions, punctuate the struggle for the bridge.

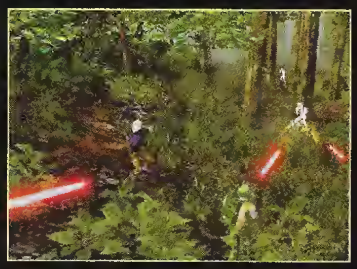
In less than one year's time, *Commando* has come a long way. It debuted at the 2003 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), during a Microsoft-sponsored conference. LucasArts only showed a trailer for the game, but it was enough. In a mere two or so minutes, the sneak peek took the conference attendees though dark and winding corridors to eventually come face-to-face with a wall crawling with buglike Geonosians. It was gorgeous and mysterious. It made people think about something other than the triumphant return of Master Chief and *Halo 2*.

LucasArts plans to flesh out *Commando* well beyond its single-player adventure. Xbox Live play will be incorporated and, while specifics are not yet available, the producers say online deathmatches, capture-the-flag, and tag multiplayer games will definitely be included, as will special downloadable content.

Boom yet again. When the bridge explodes, the first look at *Commando* in motion ends. For now, the rest of the game must be veiled, just as some of its juicier secrets, such as guest appearances by popular *Star Wars* mainstays (think furry ones, or perhaps droids), cannot be commented on. Commandos like to work in shadows, and LucasArts wouldn't have it any other way. The veil of secrecy dropped across the game lifts with its release in the fall.

"Trandoshans are an infamously treacherous and merciless race. [They're] known across the galaxy as masters of capture and enslavement," LucasArts says.

It quickly becomes apparent that *Republic Commando* **excels at pushing a frantic pace and tone.**



■ Safety orange in the jungle? Welcome to Targetsville. Population: You.

Battlefront

Inadvertently calling LucasArts' *Star Wars: Battlefront* Electronic Arts' *Battlefield 1942*, in the grand hierarchy of the faux pas, is not as great an offense as say, failing to pass the duchy on the left-hand side or forgetting that you're not supposed to stomp on Superman's cape. There's no earthly way to avoid it, and no one should bother to contend the fact. *Battlefront* is *Battlefield 1942* in Star Wars drag.

LucasArts and Pandemic, maker of the intriguing military simulation *Full Spectrum Warrior*, are teaming up for *Battlefront*, an on- and offline multiplayer wargame. Combatants brawl it out on 10 different *Star Wars* hot spots such as Endor, Naboo, Hoth, Yavin, Geonosis, and Tatooine, with 16 different maps in total. LucasArts has yet to nail down a final number of players the game will support, but claims 16 is the minimum for online play and 32 for LAN. A.I. warriors round out the package, for a grand total of 64 warriors in one game. *Battlefront* also allows two players on one console to play via a splitscreen and Xbox Live.

Battlefront births tremendous brawls pitting the Galactic Empire versus the Rebels, as well as the Separatists against the Galactic Republic; there will likely be no mixing and matching, say, pitting the Empire against the Separatists for balancing reasons. Each faction has approximately five different units—no playable Jedi, thank you—ranging from pilots to spies to heavy-weapons specialists. The units all have different attributes and come with their own strengths and weaknesses. Rebel pilots are wimpy, but they can repair ships and also use grappling guns to hoist themselves up to the underbelly of a huge AT-AT to blow it up with explosives, à la Luke Skywalker in *The Empire Strikes Back*. Rebel spies can alter their appearance and walk around disguised as Stormtroopers, and so on. In addition, a unit's appearance will vary depending on the environment it's placed in. Stormtroopers on Yavin will become Snowtroopers on Hoth.

During the fights, a third race will oftentimes play a spoiler role, but only where it's logical to have them. "Yavin doesn't have a third side," producer Jim Tso says. "In the continuity of the Star Wars universe, there aren't any intelligent indigenous species on Yavin at the time of the Clone Wars or the Galactic Civil War." The addition of a wild card to the mix oftentimes confers an advantage to one force or another. On Geonosis, the winged Geonosians will aid the Separatists against the Republic forces. Endor plays host to the Galactic Empire-hating Ewoks. When players get to Tatooine, all participants regardless of their faction will come under fire from the Tusken Raiders.

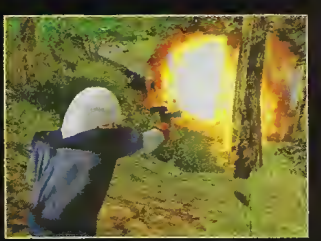
A game like this sinks or soars based on the strength of its vehicles. *Battlefront* certainly does not disappoint. Here, players will be able to mount and ride tauntauns, X-wings, snowspeeders, AT-STs, and Spider

Clone Troopers are but one of 20 or so playable character types in *Battlefront*.

Universe Wants Conquering

In addition to its many multiplayer modes, *Star Wars: Battlefront* will feature a substantial single-player conquest mode where the goal is to achieve dominance over the galaxy one planet at a time. Holding a planet for a certain time period allows players to access special bonuses—including NPC characters such as a certain Dark Lord of the Sith—that can be used at any time. Although all the bonuses will benefit the player who uses them, one stands out as all-powerful: the ability to build a Death Star and use it to blow a planet to hell.

Rebel snow troopers (right) are handy in a fight and excel at copy editing text. This fine fellow is making sure no grammatical butcheries worm their way into this caption.



No one should bother to contend the fact. ***Battlefront* is *Battlefield 1942* in Star Wars drag.**

tanks, among others. Certain vehicles accommodate two players, one driving and one manning the guns—and the larger units, such as the Empire's AT-ATs, will be able to transport units above and beyond the two-man crew.

Even with its multiplayer guts not fully intact, *Battlefront* hints at a great time in the making. It's hard to tell how the game's framerate will turn out, but Tso says 30fps is a sure bet. Hands-on play reveals the game works very well in both the first-person and the third. The verdant world Yavin seemed a perfect place for a sniper to hunker down amid the plants and pick off foes. A map on the gameplay screen made for easy location of both friend and foe, as well as command centers, which players must capture to win in certain modes. In truth, all that was missing from the chaotic, laser-filled proceedings was an Xbox Live Communicator headset from which a torrent of curse words mouthed by the great unwashed would pour.

EMPIRICAL

Force or farce? It's been a bit of both for the Star Wars games.

THE **LIGHT SIDE** OF LUCASARTS

More Chewbacca than Jar-Jar Binks, these are games worth playing.

1991

Star Wars
NES

1992

The Empire Strikes Back
NES
Super Star Wars
SNES

1993

Super Empire Strikes Back
SNES
X-Wing, Imperial Pursuit, B-Wing
IBM

1994

Super Return of the Jedi (Pictured)
SNES
TIE Fighter, Defender of the Empire
IBM

1995

Dark Forces
PC CD-ROM, Mac CD

1997

Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II
Windows 95
X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter
Windows 95

1998

Star Wars: Rogue Squadron
Windows 95, Nintendo 64

1999

Star Wars: Episode I Racer
Windows 95/98, Nintendo 64
Star Wars: X-Wing Alliance
Windows 95/98

2000

Star Wars: Episode I Battle for Naboo
Nintendo 64
Star Wars: Episode I Racer
Dreamcast, Power Mac

2001

Star Wars Starfighter
PlayStation 2
Star Wars Rogue Squadron II: Rogue Leader
GameCube
Star Wars Starfighter: Special Edition
Xbox

2002

Star Wars Racer Revenge
PlayStation 2
Star Wars Jedi Starfighter
PlayStation 2, Xbox
Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast
PC, GameCube, Xbox
Star Wars: The Clone Wars
GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox

2003

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic
Xbox, PC (Pictured)
Star Wars Rogue Squadron III: Rebel Strike
GameCube

Does this orange jumpsuit **make my ass look big?**

DATA

To celebrate LucasArts' 20-year anniversary, *Xbox Nation* compiled a near-comprehensive list of LucasArts' Star Wars games from *X-Wing* to *Yoda Stories*. For brevity, the company's compilations have been excluded; for sanity, the kiddie-themed titles such as *Star Wars Math: Jabba's Game Galaxy* have similarly been excised. Each game has been ranked and rated by *XBN*'s discerning critics to see exactly where it fits on the Light Side/Dark Side scale. As always, avoid the Dark Side. It's stinkier.

THE **DARK SIDE** OF LUCASARTS

Meesa no like the stinky!

Helmet fogging...
Too many chili-cheese dogs.

1993

Rebel Assault
PC CD-ROM, Sega CD

1994

Star Wars Screen Entertainment
Windows, Mac

1995

Rebel Assault II: The Hidden Empire
PC CD-ROM, Mac CD

1996

Shadows of the Empire
Nintendo 64

1997

Star Wars: Masters of Teras Kasi
PlayStation (Pictured)
Yoda Stories
Windows 95

1998

Star Wars: Behind the Magic
Windows 95
Star Wars: Rebellion
Windows 95

1999

Star Wars: Episode I Insider's Guide
Windows 95/98, Power Mac
Star Wars: Episode I The Phantom Menace
Windows 95/98, PlayStation

2000

Star Wars: Demolition
PlayStation, Dreamcast (Pictured)
Star Wars: Force Commander
Windows 95/98
Star Wars: Episode I Jedi Power Battles
PlayStation, Dreamcast

2001

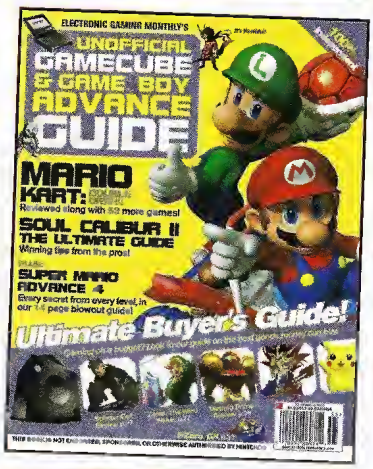
Star Wars Obi-Wan
Xbox (Pictured)
Star Wars Galactic Battlegrounds
Windows 95/98/2000

2002

Star Wars Bounty Hunter
PlayStation 2, GameCube

2003

Star Wars Galaxies: An Empire Divided
PC (Online)
Star Wars Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy
PC, Xbox



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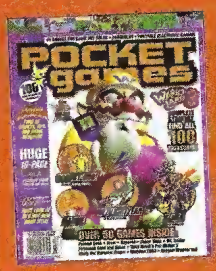

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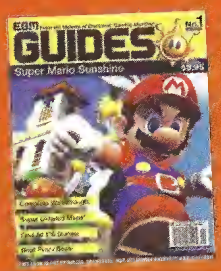

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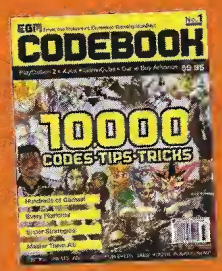

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Fast Foreward

In the spirit of the new year, *Xbox Nation* has compiled a list of why this will be a watershed year for Microsoft's 800-pound gaming gorilla. These titles are the ones to watch; the biggest, most innovative Xbox games coming from the most talented developers in the industry. The console's two most eagerly anticipated titles—*Halo 2* and *Fable*—are both set to release in the second half of 2004, along with a host of potential classics like *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow*, *Jade Empire*, *Ninja Gaiden*, and possibly, *Knights of the Old Republic 2*. It is also, quite clearly, the year of Xbox Live; more than half of these titles are predominantly online games, so if you haven't yet, now would be a great time to join the broadband revolution.

So sit back, relax, and feast your eyes on the next wave.

SPLINTER CELL PANDORA TOMORROW

Xbox just days away from a Pandora Tomorrow...

It could be the short development cycle. Perhaps it has to do with rumors of a bigger, real *Splinter Cell* sequel also in the works. Maybe it's the lack of a "2" in the title. Whatever the reason, the perception that *Pandora Tomorrow* is not a full sequel to *Splinter Cell* needs to be quashed. Now. We've been to the future, and *Tomorrow* looks fantastic. Its single-player game refines *Splinter Cell*'s proven gameplay with less-frustrating stealth action and the addition of alternate paths during missions. Best of all, *Pandora* features a hugely innovative multiplayer side to the franchise that introduces, for the first time anywhere, the idea of competitive stealth gameplay.

This is *the* triple-A game to play before the release of...well, a certain Microsoft game that starts with "H" and ends with "2". Dig our four-page report now, then check back next issue when we put old dog Sam Fisher to the test in *XBN*'s authoritative review.

Data

Dev: Ubisoft • Pub: Ubisoft • Release: March

The Art of Playing Alone

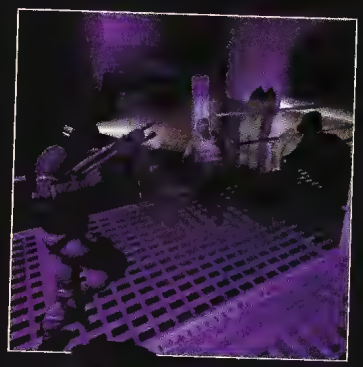
Less-frustrating single-player missions? Yum! There's less trial and error this time around. The first game pissed off more than a few gamers with its unforgiving, ultralinear stealth scenarios and (on Xbox) unskippable cut-scenes. One careless alarm meant you just lost 10 minutes of your life creeping around in the shadows. Aside from smarter A.I. and more-consistent detection, *Pandora* offers alternate paths, giving you different approaches and playing styles. One level lets you discover different ways to enter Los Angeles International Airport—on the back of a truck, on foot, or dressed as a Hari Krishna. Another gives you choices on how to get from one end of a train to the other—on top, along the side, underneath, or straight through the cabins.

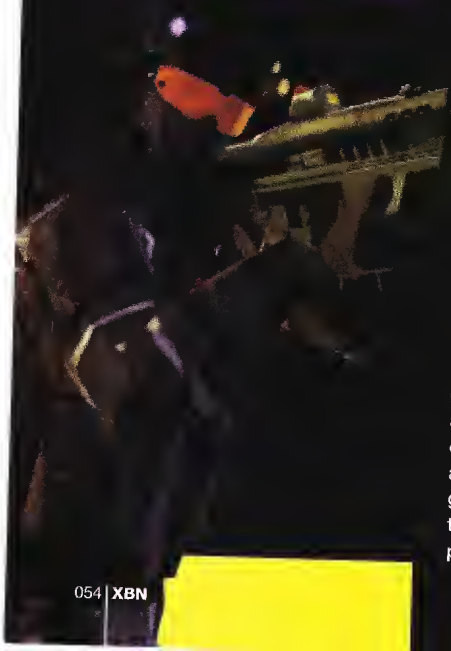
But what about those damn alarms? Alarms are also more realistic, with three rising levels of A.I. awareness. An all-out alert summons enemy reinforcements that are beefier and harder (but not impossible) to take out. This means missions become more difficult once you're discovered, but remain beatable, if you've got the skills.

In case you screw it up, however... The game may chalk it up and move on. *Pandora*'s story can change based on the decisions you make. Miss the chance to kill someone, and it can come back later to haunt you.

Sam's New Tricks

Actually, more than new tricks and toys, Sam comes now implanted with flashbangs, chaff grenades, laser sighting on your FN7 side arm, a zoom mic on your binoculars, as well as thermal and night vision on your optical cable. You can also take hostages during combat, whistle at enemies, shift your weight to either side during cover, jump over cover while hanging upside down, and sneak past open doors with the "SWAT turn" action.





Shadow Strike: Multiplayer Tactical Espionage

How does *Splinter Cell* multiplayer work on Live?
Ingeniously well actually. A total of four players engage in online tactical espionage, in which teams of two defend and capture objectives. One side plays the role of spies who infiltrate and steal secrets with equal parts stealth and techno gadgets. The other side arms itself to the teeth as mercenaries who must defend key areas with firepower and motion detectors. Producer Arnaud Carrette at Ubisoft describes a typical battle as an "information war" between the two sides, as both teams use clues to get the jump on the match. "Since communications [over the Xbox Live headset] can be intercepted," he says, "I anticipate that players will even make their own [verbal] code words when communicating with each other to trick the other team."

Sounds intense. What are the goals?
During neutralization matches, spies go after locked safes under the gun, and have a certain amount of time to obtain the goods. Extraction games are similar, except instead of simply getting to the safes, spies must then transport the contents to an extraction point. In Sabotage mode, spies need to plant a hacking device, then defend it for a specified time. All these games will be playable over five or six maps.

But why only four players?
All for the love of tension. Developers at Ubisoft tested the game with larger numbers of players but found that it was too much like a straight shooter. On matches with more than four players, nobody used any stealth. In addition, with fewer players, small details become integral. Clues such as curtain movement, falling dust, and shot-out lights can help you find enemies. Something as simple as a blood trail can affect your approach, as Carrette points out, "[In one game], as I was tracking down a spy thanks to the blood he was dripping, the trail suddenly ended with a bigger-than-usual blood stain. I looked above, and the spy was hanging on a beam, dripping blood all over. [Then] I helped him off the beam as kindly as a mercenary would!"

Spies Like Us

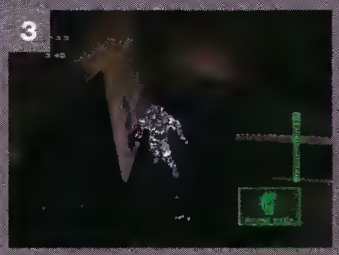
The developers of *Pandora Tomorrow* love playing their own creations. "I enjoy playing as the mercenaries a lot," producer Arnaud Carrette says. "The first-person camera makes the experience very immersive." Carrette particularly enjoys looking for clues that will betray the location of a spy. "What I love most is the ambiguous feeling of being powerful but also fearing the dark and [the unseen]. That brings out interesting emotions."

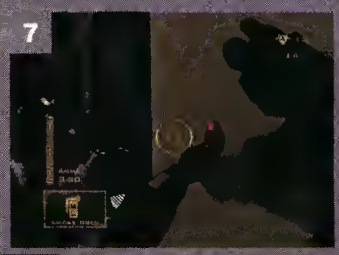
Spy-on-Spy Action

MERCENARY

Hit 'em Hard and Fast

As a mercenary, you'll play the game in a first-person view that's similar in feel to *Rainbow Six 3*, giving you maximum ambience and immersion. The objective is simple: Use your assortment of gadgets and the strong arm of your assault rifle to search and suppress your enemies. Below are just some of the ways to dish out pain.





1. First-Person Perspective: Inspired by the Genome soldiers' cone of vision in *Metal Gear Solid*, mercs are only able to see in a first-person perspective, which gives them a smaller but more immersive view of their surroundings.

2. Main Weapon: An assault rifle. This gun features a zoom and fully automatic fire. It is the only real gun in *Pandora*'s multiplayer game.

3. Sub-Weapon: Your rifle is good for overkill, but for humiliation and finesse, use an electric shock to paralyze spies before you finish them off.

4. Melee Attack: Last but not least, mercs have a powerful charging melee attack that uses the butt of your rifle to knock a spy on his ass.

5. Opticals: In addition to your all-important flashlight (which does not emit an electronic signal that spies can pick up on), mercs can use motion and EMF (electromagnetic field) detectors to see when spies use night and thermal vision.

6. Tracking Spies: In addition to your optical filters, you can also zoom in on an area to listen for giveaways. Use clues such as blood and environmental effects (swaying lights, moving curtains, blood trails, etc.) to pinpoint a spy's location.

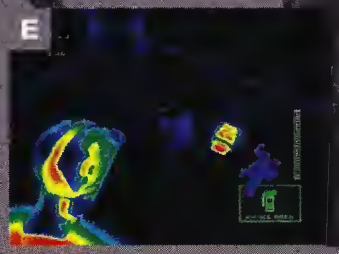
7. Gadgets: Plant mines and set up trip wires to catch careless spies. Toss phosphorescent grenades to paint spies bright Xbox green in the dark. Use frag grenades and blow 'em to pieces!

8. Tricks: Although spies can eavesdrop on your communications, mercs are physically stronger, meaning you can literally get the drop on your enemies by landing on top of them.

SPY

Light is Your Enemy

As a spy, you'll play the game in *Splinter Cell*'s standard third-person perspective, a view that gives you ample situational awareness. The objective is simple: Use stealth and the cover of darkness to creep your way to the level objective. Confuse mercenaries with an assortment of espionage tricks. Below are just some of the ways to remain unseen.



A. Third-Person Perspective: In order to have full control over movement (including new moves such as hopping over waist-level guardrails and running up walls), spies play from a third-person camera angle.

B. Main Weapon: Although spies are only equipped with a nonlethal stun pistol, they have the ability to fire tiny microphones for intercepting merc communications. Additionally, a tagged merc also show up on a spy's radar screen. How convenient!

C. Lethal Moves: Since spies use nonlethal bullets, any killing they do employs the old-fashioned two-handed neck-breaking method. Snap!

D. Melee Attack: Spies are simply no good at close range. Their punches lacks both damage and reach. Stick to the snapping of necks if you really want someone dead.

E. Vision Options: Similar to Sam Fisher in the single-player game, spies can look around in the dark and use thermal vision to see trip wires and body heat.

F. Tracking Mercenaries: Mercs have visors on their helmets that change color to show what type of vision they are currently using: Normal, nonenhanced vision is amber, while motion detectors show up red, and EMF detection is blue.

G. Gadgets: Smoke grenades and sticky shockers will be necessary to help you cover your tracks and escape from close-range death.

H. Tricks: Spies have a large assortment of ways to trick enemies, from triggering fake trip wire alarms to shooting movable objects to create false clues for searching mercs.

BREAKDOWN

He's going to ram his fist into your stomach!

Namco's first-person adventure has been the subject of mystified confusion for much of the past few months. The company's been deliberately coy with gameplay details, and the playable version shown at the Tokyo Game Show last fall only served to bewilder gamers even further. With *Breakdown*'s release date drawing near, however, the Xbox exclusive has shaped up remarkably. In fact, if you forget about Team Ninja for a moment, it's one of the most promising third-party Japanese titles this year.

Well, then break it down.
Derrick Cole is an average guy who wakes up as a test subject in a Japanese research facility without any memory of why he's there. But three separate events occur to help break the monotony in his cell: A strange woman named Alex comes to bust him out, an army of soldiers hunts him down, and a horde of mutants haunt the once sanguine laboratory. Oh, and have we forgotten to mention that Derrick also houses an immense power within his body—power that lets him take on near-invincible aliens with his bare fists? As the player, you're as much in the dark as Derrick, and the wild hallucinations that you get offer only a smattering of clues. Explore the crumbling facility, find a way out, and discover your destiny in the process.

Who the hell wants to play a fighting game in first-person perspective?
Well, we do—and you might too. As it turns out, *Breakdown* borrows equally from *Deus Ex* and *Resident Evil* for its gameplay and atmosphere. Although the story line is much more linear than Ion Storm's first-person groundbreaker, the heavy plot, creepy environments, and emphasis on exploration will be instantly familiar to adventure game veterans. The most amazing aspect of *Breakdown* is how the game stays in the first-person perspective—even during story cut-scenes. At once immersive and cinematic, this game needs to be seen to be believed.

Much more than just a first-person shooter then...
Yes—to amusing extremes. The opening of the game has Derrick examining a hamburger, taking two bites out of it, becoming violently ill, and then tossing his cookies in a nearby toilet. Twice. Fleeing from a gunship and crawling through the rubble of a bomb blast are standard-issue scenarios in many titles, but with *Breakdown*'s viewpoint, it takes on an element of immersion missing in third-person action games. With *Breakdown*, getting digitally kicked in the teeth has never felt more real.

Otogi 2

X04: JAPANESE GAMES

Lost In Translation in 2004?

You certainly don't need to tell *XBN* that 2003 was an overall disappointing year for Japanese games development on Xbox. Aside from *Panzer Dragoon Orta*, we dare you to name one other Japanese game that even mattered in 2003.

Right, just as we thought: *Otogi* by From Software. We're not sure what the folks over at From Software are eating for breakfast, but their productivity has been going through the roof. *Otogi 2*, which hit Japanese shelves on Christmas 2003, is an amazing work of art, every bit as arresting and bizarre as the first game, but now with 150 percent more particle showers and destructible environments as the result of every freaking move. No word yet on whether Sega will publish *Otogi 2* here, but rumors are, the game will make it to America this year.

The other game to finally leave the womb is Microsoft Japan's very own *Magatama*. To make a long story short, the game sucks on a level the likes not seen since *Sidebars*. Microsoft has confirmed that *Magatama* will not, luckily, be making its way Stateside. Other games to watch out for are much shooters *Chrome Hound*, *Age of Arms*, and *Exaskeleton*. To be sure, look for more surprise announcements later this year. And as always, *XBN* will import 'em so you won't have to.

Data
Dev: Namco • Pub: Namco • Release: March

TRUE FANTASY LIVE ONLINE

Fulfill your true fantasies on Xbox Live

When it comes to RPGs on Xbox Live, what sort of options are out there? Let's see—there's *Phantasy Star Online*... and that's pretty much it. But with the introduction of *True Fantasy*, an RPG supporting thousands of simultaneous players, quest-starved geeks everywhere will finally have the chance to get virtually married on Xbox Live.

An *EverQuest* wannabe for Xbox? The official genre is MMORPG (massively multiplayer online RPG), but the developers at Fukuoka, Japan-based Level 5 are cautiously avoiding the constant fights and boring pace of *EverQuest* and other MMORPGs. Instead, there's a system of skills that you gain proficiency in by repeated usage. These skills literally run the gamut, from prowess with a spear to more peaceful pursuits like fishing, cooking, and wood chopping.

Why don't I just play an MMORPG on my better-than-your-crappy PC? One reason: real-time voice chat with the Xbox Live headset. "In the beginning, I was dead set against voice chat," producer Akihiro Hino admits. "But once we actually put the feature in, I realized that voice gives you this 'live' feeling that you can't get with keyboard conversations."

Data
Dev: Microsoft • Pub: Level 5 • Release: Fall

PHANTOM DUST

Mind over matter on Xbox Live

If collectible battle cards weren't the preferred hobby of sunlight-fearing *Magic: The Gathering* nerds, their game of choice might be Microsoft's latest Japanese creation, *Phantom Dust*. It has the strategic elements of a card game like *Magic* or *Yu-Gi-Oh*, but instead of cardboard crack vials, you collect phenomenal psychic powers.

So it's an online action game? Exactly. *Dust* (sounds like a drug, doesn't it?) has a card game's addictive collectible appeal, allowing players to create a "deck" of abilities, and "drawing" powers out during cutting-edge 3D battles. Entire cities blocks are laid to waste.

What about the single-player? *Dust*'s creators won't comment on the game's post apocalyptic setting and whether the game will play out like an animated *Mad Max*, but all will be forgiven as long as *Dust* supports up to eight players online!

Data
Dev: Microsoft • Pub: Microsoft • Release: Fall

MATRIX ONLINE

Finally a Good Matrix Game?

Memories of last year's *Enter the Matrix* game are best left repressed, but our souls still burn for a good title based on this potential treasure trove of a license. Rumors are that there are two *Matrix* online games in the works. The first, published by Ubisoft, is an action-oriented universe featuring an emphasis on gunplay and kung fu. The other is an MMORPG published by Warner Bros. Games.

DRIV3R

B4by y0u c4n dr1v3 my c4r

When the first *Driver* came drifting onto the PlayStation way back in 1999, gamers experienced a new type of racing thrill. With its hard-boiled "freelance wheelman working for the mob" premise, *Driver* gave us more compelling reasons for putting the pedal to the metal. Gritty, urban, and photo-realistic, *Driver* was the pre-cursor, the evolutionary bridge, if you will, from the innocence of *Ridge Racer* to the debauchery of *Grand Theft Auto III*. Which is why it's ironic, yet not surprising that *Driv3r*—the series' Xbox debut—plays out like *GTA3*, only with much better graphics.

Uh oh. Attack of the clones?

So long as *GTA3*'s gameplay formula isn't going to be milked dry of its novelty any time soon, we see nothing wrong with having more of the same, as long as there are improvements.

But why should I play *Driv3r* over the *GTA Double-Pack*?

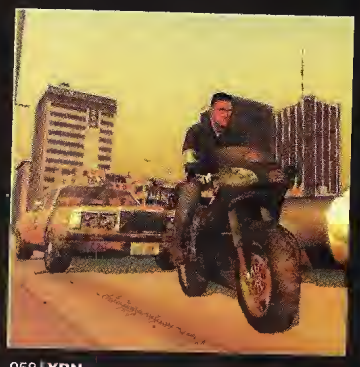
Well, hopefully by now, you're sick to death of *GTA3* and *Vice City*. But if that isn't reason enough, *Driv3r* features innovations not found in other, equally ambitious clones. To wit—*Driv3r*'s advanced physics system that not only takes into account the results of vehicle handling and collisions, but also what happens when you lob grenades into vehicles as they're lifted, blown to pieces, and mangled. Futhermore, you can use a fat arsenal of modern weapons to blow out car windows and pepper them full of bullet holes. But *Driv3r*'s most significant contribution has to be its excellent on-foot controls, which mirror the controls in third-person shooters like *Max Payne 2* and *Brute Force*. Overall, the game sweats as many details as it does bullets.

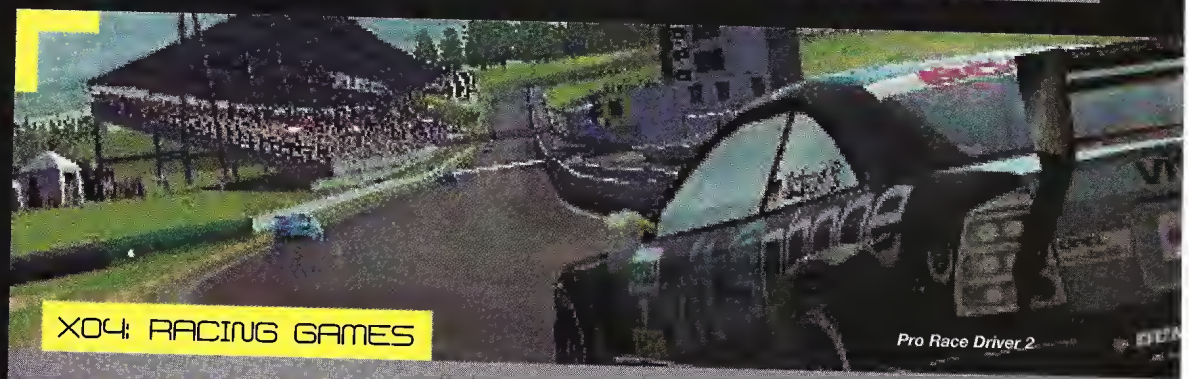
Where will the game take place?

Miami, Nice, and Istanbul. Each city will be full of landmarks such as a fully rendered Orange Bowl stadium you'll actually be able to drive your car into and walk around in. Unfortunately, *Driv3r* will lack Xbox Live support for additional downloadable content.

Data

Dev: Reflections • Pub: Atari • Release: Spring





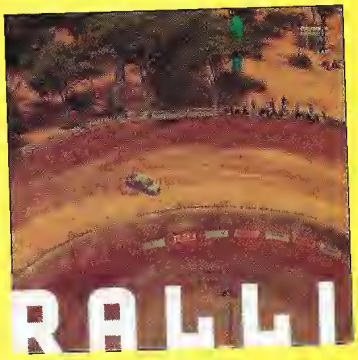
Pro Race Driver 2

X04: RACING GAMES

It's Good to Drift Together

If the racing mood that year was characterized by the constant waiting of *Project Gotham Racing 2*, then 2003 will be remembered as the year of the solid, but relatively unknown racing game. There's nothing quite as big as *Gotham* on the calendar in '04, but racing games continue to crowd the Xbox. Aside from Microsoft's excellent *Rallisport Challenge 2* (see opposite page) you can look forward to sequels such as the hardcore supercar simulator *Need for Speed: Underground*, as well as the king of arcade racers, *Burnout 3*. Currently, there isn't much info about these two games, but let's hope developers have at least a little bit play from the awesome Xbox Live implementation in *Gotham 2*. Meanwhile, Codemasters has been in the since ever-so-late *Pro Race Driver 2*, a surprisingly capable racing sim that's equal parts realism and thrills.

Want more under the hood? There's always online racing games. The Japanese variety: Capcom's *Auto Modellista*, a cel-shaded arcade racer ported over from the PlayStation 2, and Sega GT online, choice gearhead racing with a nice balance of hardcore simulation and more arcade-oriented thrills. Not Gran Turismo 4 (there are not), but all of these online racers have the potential to rock Xbox Live in 2004.



RALLISPORT CHALLENGE 2

Quite possibly the finest rally racer ever tuned for a console

Perhaps, as a gesture of goodwill to make up for *Project Gotham Racing 2*'s lack of a rally mode, Microsoft is releasing *RalliSport Challenge 2* hot on the heels of its holiday racing spectacular. Sequel to one of 2002's Xbox racers, it's no understatement to say that *RalliSport 2* has the potential to be the best rally racer ever made.

Damn, that's some hyperbole.

No it isn't. And here's why: Imagine you're strapped into the bucket seat of a 600 horsepower rally rocket, bouncing along a loose, yet diamond hard gravel road in the Australian outback. A smoke screen of dust from your opponent's Lancia gives your mouth the dry taste of dirt. "Medium left, long, into a chicane!" cries your navigator, plastered himself by the centripetal forces of your 60 mph turn. The four-wheel drift is perfect, and your car swings itself around the slippery turn. Then during the chicane, something goes wrong. You went for the feint drift, turning your vehicle away from the direction of the corner—compressing the left side of your suspension for a rebound—but you were late on the gas. The understeer pulls you wide, then there's the dull crunch of crumpling fiberglass. Safety glass, like fresh popcorn, lands in the soft opening between your helmet and your jump suit, sliding down your back like ice. The third-person view lets you know that your spoiler hangs by a thread and your rear bumper has disappeared. The Lancia pulls further ahead.

What the hell was that about?

RalliSport 2 is completely obsessed with mud, blood, and tears. Coming to an Xbox Live server near you.

Data
Dev: Dice • Pub: Micro..oft • Release: Spring

X-MEN: LEGENDS

Children of the atom, level up!

The X-Men have always been hunted, feared, and despised—just not on Microsoft's Xbox. The comic book superteam leaps to life in a fanboy's wildest dream, an action-RPG by Raven and Activision.

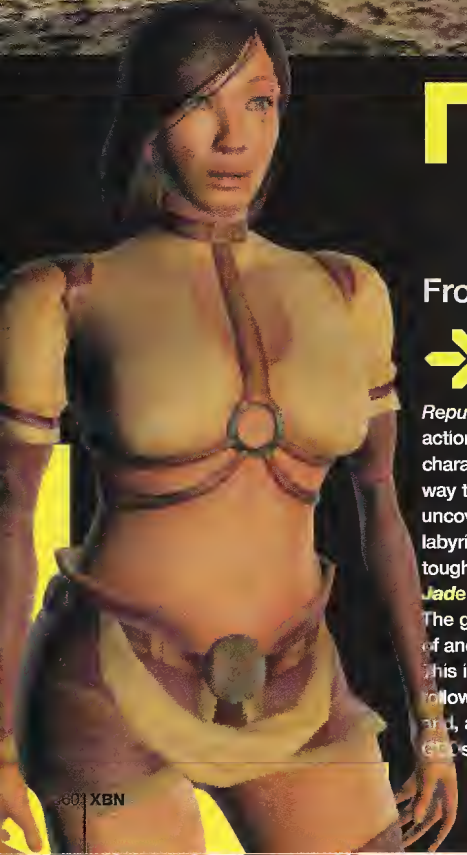
Mag-NET-oh? Or Mag-NEA-toh?

Comic god Stan "The Man" Lee always pronounces it Mag-NEAT-oh, and he would likely stuff you in Mylar for asking such an obvious question about *Legends*' main villain. In addition, players get to fight the Brotherhood of Mutants, who wisely dropped the adjective "evil" from their name, and the robotic Sentinels.

Does my superfluous third nipple make me a mutant?

No, but you can build your own team of X-Men from a roster of 19 heroes, including Wolverine and Gambit. You can also train your squad, improve their abilities, and use their various superpowers to overcome obstacles.

Data
Dev: Raven • Pub: Activision • Release: Winter



JADE

From Jedi Knights to Shaolin monks...behold BioWare's next opus

Jade Empire, BioWare's next role-playing opus is a lot like *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, sans the Wookie-on-Wookie action. Players choose one of six character archetypes and make their way through a mythological universe to uncover the mysteries of the game's labyrinthine plot. Expect plenty of tough decision making along the way.

Jade Empire. Sounds...Asian?
The game is a mythological rendition of ancient China, by way of Canada. This is the Ontario-based developer's follow-up effort to megahit *Knights* and, according to the company's co-CEOs Greg Zeschuck and Ray Muzyka, it's the game they've been yearning to make since they started BioWare back in 1995.

BioWare. Sounds...medical?
Yup. These guys both have M.D. degrees...hence the name. Since deciding to trade in their stethoscopes for C++ compilers, they've built a reputation as one of the most consistent developers in the industry, based on the strength of RPG classics like *Baldur's Gate* and *Neverwinter Nights* on PC.

Ah, so more turn-based combat...
Not exactly. *Jade*'s epic exploration and questing will be punctuated by real-time one-on-one combat. It's a far cry from the turn-based *D&D*-style skirmishes that have been BioWare's calling card for so long.

EMPIRE

What makes them think they can pull off a good 3D fighter?
Good question. It's always been a notoriously difficult genre for Western developers to penetrate. It should be noted, however, that BioWare has surprised us before; its only other console title, *MDK2* for Dreamcast, was an incredibly tight third-person action game—belying the fact that it was the company's first crack at the genre, and on a console, no less. Yeah, so *Knights* is a bit rough around the edges. BioWare is taking everything it learned with *Knights* and applying it to *Jade*. The game is already looking nice, making use of subtle lighting techniques and more convincing character animation.

Data
Dev: BioWare • Pub: Microsoft • Release: Winter

KOTOR2 in 2004?

Did somebody say *Knights of the Old Republic 2*? Don't hold your breath just yet for 2004, but BioWare is (simultaneously) cookin' up some Jedi goodness in the oven.

SUDEKI

Japanese for "oft-delayed"

Light and dark clash in Climax's action-RPG *Sudeki*, but its developers warn that hoary RPG clichés will be shown the door. Eschewing turn-based combat for fluid, real-time brawling, *Sudeki* stands to be Xbox's potential RPG hit.
Wait. An action-RPG?
Indeed. Players can execute attacks, change weapons, cast spells without pausing the game. *Sudeki* slows down combat so it's possible to make tactical decisions, without losing the flow of a good fight.
Um, that's it?
Well, how about a great story? Lead designer Tomas Pirinen says, "You don't just have your good guys and your bad guys. The guys who look most beautiful and who have this beautiful, lush light world aren't necessarily the ones in the right in this war."

Data
Dev: Climax • Pub: Microsoft • Release: Summer

DEAD OR ALIVE ULTIMATE

It's good to bounce together

Few Xbox historians will forget the classic *Dead or Alive 3* advertisements in which noted pundits praised the game's flawless execution with the heartfelt sentiment, "She kicks high." Not content to rest on the strength of this endorsement, nor on the laurels of the quirky *Dead or Alive* femme epic *Xtreme Beach Volleyball*, Tecmo plans to plumb its roots in a very big way. *Dead or Alive Ultimate* is an updated, online-capable rerelease of Tecmo's exclusive Xbox brawler. The result? Kung-fu fightin' for the masses in 2004.

Does this look infected to you?
Infected with both boobosity and graphical excellence, perhaps. *Ultimate* contains an updated version of the original jiggly brawler *Dead or Alive* in all its low-polygon glory, a rarity previously released on the Saturn only in Japan, and then later the PlayStation 1. Novelty aside, however, *Ultimate* will also more importantly contain an updated *Dead or Alive 2*, with a fresh coat of visuals hot off the *Xtreme Beach Volleyball* engine. Graphical upgrades notwithstanding, both games will be fully playable via Xbox Live and will contain such niceties as extra costumes for the game's combatants and new fighting arenas. Also expect downloadable content in the form of thongs and flesh-colored bikinis.

Is it supposed to burn?
No. That's your soul and a whole other game entirely. *Ultimate* is the world's first online 3D fighter—and no, it won't be an unplayable mess, promises Tecmo's Tomonobu Itagaki. Players can expect clean, lag-free fights (at 30 frames per second), as well as global ranking and leaderboard support.

Please! I think I need a doctor!
Look, a licensed physician would tell you the same damn thing: Play lots of *Ninja Gaiden* offline, and then come March, get ready to take Ryu Hayabusa along with the rest of the *Dead or Alive* cast online for some of that good ol' ultraviolence.

Data
Dev: Team Ninja • Pub: Tecmo • Release: March

XO4: FIGHTING GAMES

Fight, you brave fighting fighters!

Ask any self-respecting fighting fan who has an Xbox, and the response is unanimous: Soul Calibur 2 rules! 2 is now the bigger question is—what's next? We predict that while *Soul Calibur 3* is being developed, the game won't see release in 2004. In fact, the next Calibur game may skip this generation altogether and make its debut on Xbox 2 and PlayStation 3 sometime in late 2005 or early 2006.

But all is not lost. Xbox owners can look forward to Midway's next fisticuff orgy in the form of *Mortal Kombat* as well as Tecmo's godly brawler in the form of *Dead or Alive*. Code Chronos Games has stated *Genesis* won't be a typical one-on-one fighter, but rather an adventure game with RPG features and characters. We're sure to keep an eye out for a release based on Dave Finch's classic cyberdeviant book, *Fight Club*.

FABLE

Your 15 minutes of medieval fame

After a ridiculously long four year-development cycle, *Fable*, one of the most ambitious RPGs ever conceived is finally approaching release. "We're working really hard to get the game to 'code complete'," director Dene Carter says, "where every feature has been implemented, and we only have bug fixes and 'feel' revisions left."

What's with the pomp?

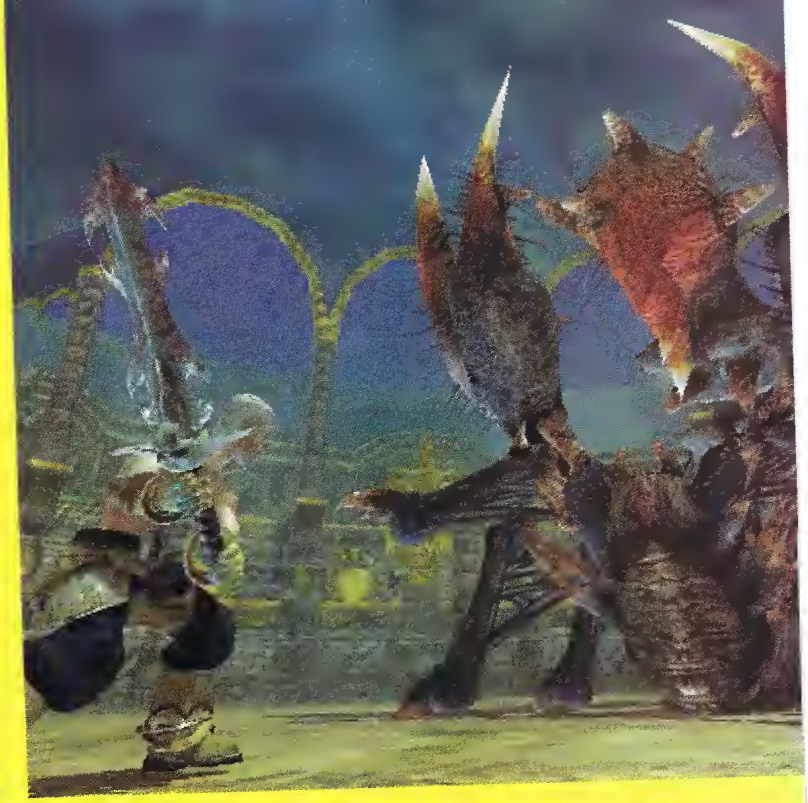
Well, *Fable* isn't your typical RPG, full of stats, dungeon crawling, and townspeople obsessed with giving you random errands to run. The game gives you the freedom of choice to shape your own fantasy world. Your character starts *Fable* as a teenager and ends around midlife. During that time, you join guilds, undertake quests, and build a reputation.

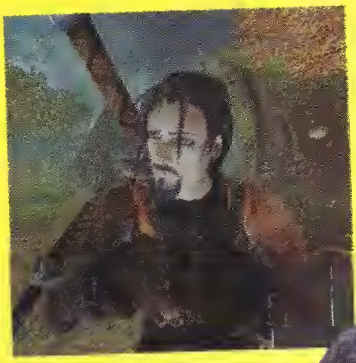
Sounds pretty standard so far...

Carter would disagree: The mutable world of *Fable* makes it unique. "Our aim is to ensure that each player feels they've had ample opportunity to engage with the world in their own way, taking up the thread of the story when they feel like it," Carter says.

Data

Dev: Microsoft • Pub: Big Blue Box • Rel: Summer





B.C.

Games before Christ?

Xbox Nation has been eyeing *B.C.* ever since we peered into its brutal prehistoric world last May. Simulating man's Jurassic struggles, *B.C.* appoints you the chief tribesman, who has to contend with, among other perils, an ass-kicking T-Rex 20 times the size of Marc Bolan.

So you fight dinosaurs?

Well, there's more to it than that. Your people are searching for a legendary Utopia beyond the snowy mountains. Get them there without becoming extinct.

Do you fight plants?

No, you eat them. Stack rocks, build shelters, and kill for food; it's all about keeping your tribe alive through nurture and nature. The missions are a mix of puzzles and real-time strategy action, keeping you on your toes while managing resources.

Tastes like chicken!

Just wait until you get to later levels and face smart simians. Yummm, monkeys!

Data

Dev: [illegible] • Pub: Microsoft • Release: Summer

KAMEO: ELEMENTS OF POWER

Like slaughter for chocolate

Kameo, one of Rare's most promising adventures since *Donkey Kong 64*, has been a long time coming—it actually began its life as a GameCube title before moving over to Xbox when Microsoft acquired Rare—and yet the game still hasn't received much attention from the press.

Does that mean it sucks?

Nope, in this age of sequels and remakes, it just means *Kameo*'s a new, unfamiliar face. The game features beautiful fantasy worlds inhabited by an assortment of imaginative creatures and enemies.

Sounds all fuzzy bunnies...

Kameo actually has no attack moves of her own, rather, players have the ability to capture and develop 18 distinct monsters, ranging from a stone-throwing rock creature to airborne insects. These monsters must be captured while young, and then raised and trained to be part of her clique. It's all a bit *Pokémon*, if you're into that sort of thing....

Data

Dev: Rare • Pub: Microsoft • Release: Summer

SILENT HILL 4 THE ROOM

Forget about pushing the envelope. *Silent Hill 4* tears it to pieces.

What is it that drives Akira Yamaoka's brain? Dark flashbacks of sordid past lives? Ladies with two heads who walk on all fours like a spider? Or just the desire to freak out as many console owners as humanly possible? A bit of everything, we imagine—all part of the reason why his *Silent Hill* series has dripped with psycho horror action for three games running. *The Room* mixes the familiar and the eerily disturbing. If you're looking for scary, drive straight past Raccoon City. Head on down to *Silent Hill*, population: you.

Something even scarier: No *Silent Hill 3* for Xbox.
Alas, an Xbox port of Konami's superb zombie-necrophilia-laced PlayStation 2 adventure has been dropped. Instead, Akira Yamaoka and his team at KCE Tokyo will simply release *The Room*, their newest and most horrifying scare-fest on the PS2 and Xbox simultaneously this fall. There's no word yet on Xbox-only content, but look on the bright side—at least Xbox owners won't have to wait a year after the PS2 version's release to get in on the survival action.

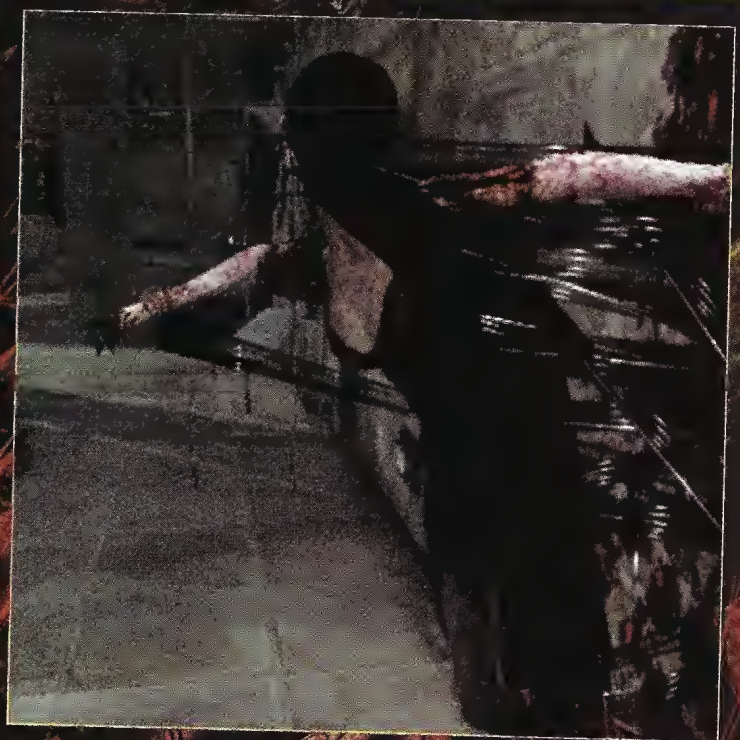
So where's the heart of darkness this time in *Silent Hill 4*?
Apparently, in your own room. You play as Henry Townshend, a single 20-something who lives alone in a swingin' bachelor pad near Silent Hill. After awaking from a nightmare one morning, Henry finds himself trapped inside his own apartment—the windows won't budge, the phone doesn't work, and the front door's comically chained shut. After five days of futility and starvation, Henry gets a break, sort of—a giant hole opens up in his bathroom wall, leading to a world beyond, full of unsavory abominations. You'll have to alternate between this realm and Henry's abode to answer the age old question: "Dear God, why me?"

More headless nurses and screaming baby heads, then?
You know you love it. *Silent Hill 4* has more unholy enemies than ever before, which is why Yamaoka explains that the latest in the series has a heavier emphasis on action over puzzles.

Data
Dev: Namco • Pub: Namco • Release: Spring

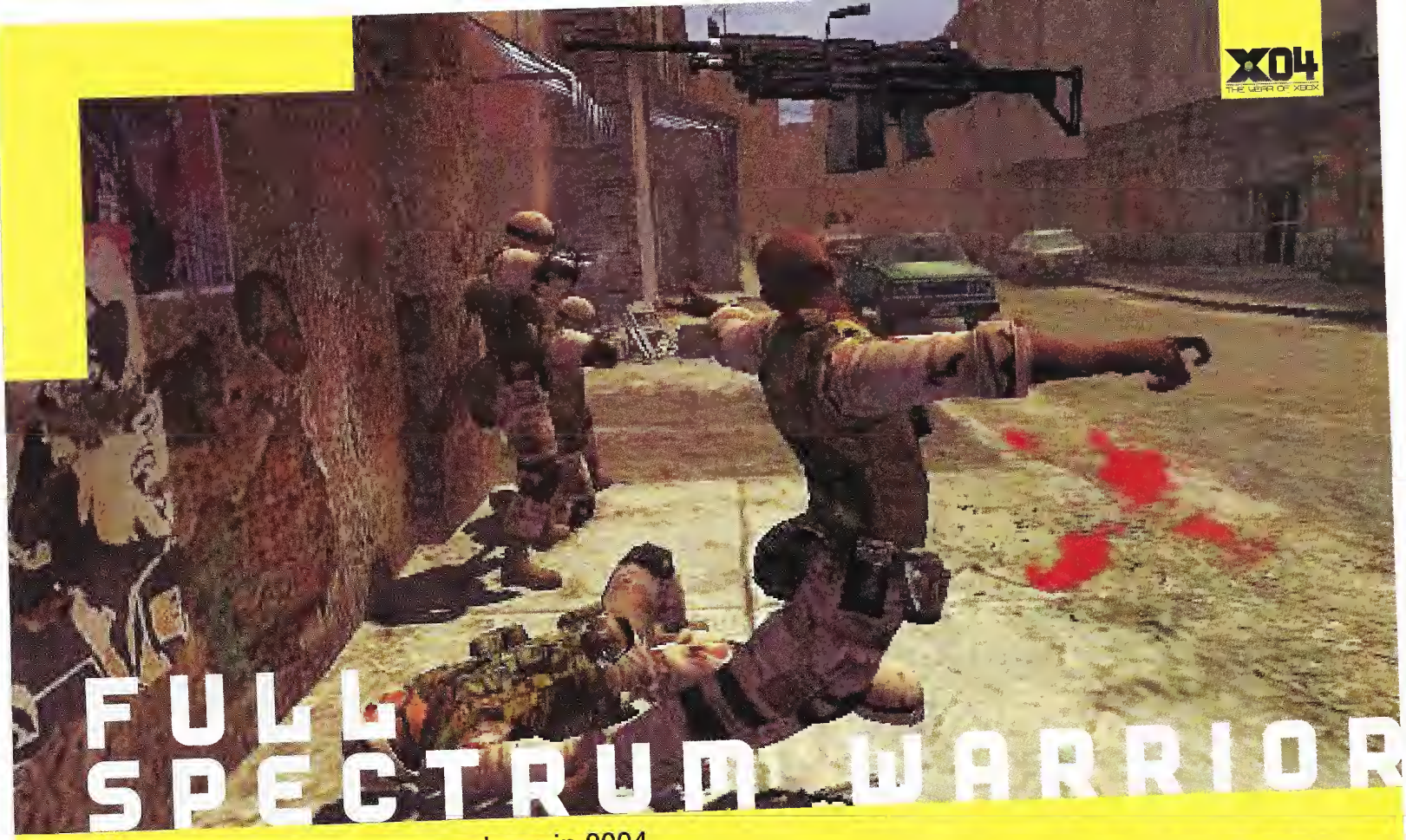
A Room to a View

The Room is the first game in the series to use a first-person perspective—while the world beyond the hole is shown in traditional third-person, all the scenes inside Henry's apartment are seen from his eyes. Yamaoka explains the main theme of the game: "It's about having your own room, your safe spot that you call a home...threatened. When that comfort zone starts to change, that's where the horror begins in this game."



Enjoy the Silence

If all you own is an Xbox, you may be forgiven if you're a little hazy on the whole *Silent Hill* continuum, as *Restless Dreams*, the second game in the series and the only Xbox release, hit the shops just a few weeks after the system launched in 2001. Here's the basic premise: You're an average Joe (or Josephine) thrown into surreal worlds filled with zombies, demonic wolves, monsters made out of legs, and other creatures they never show on *The Crocodile Hunter*. You fight back by collecting weapons, searching for fellow humans, and solving some occasionally mind-bending puzzles (some of which are just as infuriating and nonsensical as those found in *Resident Evil*). What makes the series special is all in the presentation—there aren't many jump-out-of-your-seat moments, but the tension level is cranked up so high you're at the edge of your seat for the whole 10-hour ride.



FULL SPECTRUM WARRIOR

Putting our tax dollars to good use in 2004

The most surprising aspect of *Full Spectrum Warrior*—quite possibly one of the most intense and shell-shocked war games we've ever played—is the fact that, as a player, you never actually pull the trigger. *Warrior* is beautiful, gritty tactical action that plays out like a real-time strategy game, except this time, you're a squad leader roughing it out in the urban wilderness of some Middle Eastern hellhole. Initially developed as an interactive tool to train grunt-level infantry in the ways of squad-based urban warfare, *Warrior* has shaped up to be one of the finest "from tactical to practical" examples of trickle-down military technology ever.

Hmm, *Full Spectrum Warrior*. More military obsession with rainbows?

Yeah, cryptic title. A "full spectrum" warrior is one who is trained in all aspects of infantry warfare, be it reconnaissance, search and rescue, or assault. You'll control two intelligent four-man fire teams in real time. Sorties take place in settings as diverse as the Middle East, Asia, and Eastern Europe. A typical chapter, for instance, involves the lockdown of a foreign city over a 12-hour period, using the same process that the U.S. military actually uses to secure hostile territory during war.

Too much CNN is bad for you.

Realism permeates every level of design in *Warrior*. Since the game simulates the real thing out on the front lines, everything from ammo and personnel management to field tactics is meticulously replicated. As the acting sergeant, your situational awareness is only as good as what your squad can see at any given moment. Directing areas of gunfire and ordering your troops into superior positions—without having to micromanage their every move—means that A.I. is a supremely important.

And then there's Xbox Live...

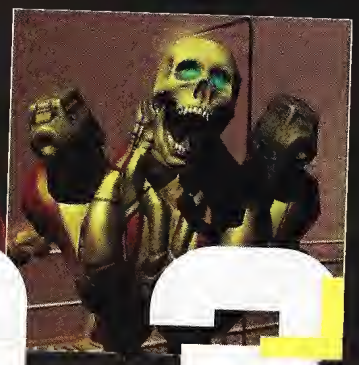
At an early level of development, Pandemic decided to restrict *Warrior* on Xbox Live to co-op matches, with each player controlling a fire team. Running the gauntlet through dense city environments means that you and a buddy will have to watch each other's backs. There's also the option to record your single-player sessions to trade online for a neverending supply of...um, replay videos to watch? What we'd like to know is, if our tax dollars helped fund the development of this game, why aren't we getting copies for free?

Data
Dev: Pandemic • Pub: THQ • Release: March

XO4: MILITARY SIMS

Xbox: System of Choice for Gun Lovers

Being the youngest scion of a more hardcore PC gaming machine, the Xbox has, hands down, the best military shooters on any console to date. The system's military shooters cover a storied lineup of first-person franchises: Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon, Rainbow Six, or even stealth action games like Splinter Cell, anything bearing the Clancy mantle seems to do well with middle America. Which is why the pandemic release of Ghost Recon 2 and Rainbow Six 3 will spell a new military renaissance for Microsoft's behemoth gaming machine. In the meantime, watch your six for realistic military sims like Codemasters' Operation Flashpoint, a PC-ported FPS featuring huge, expansive environments that are rendered on the fly, a taut Cold War scenario, and a realistic controllable vehicles on and off Xbox Live.



DOOM 3

Imagine there's no heaven. Only space stations and pentagrams

Back in 1993, *Doom* single-handedly kick started a first-person shooter revolution on PCs with its state-of-the-art visuals and fistfuls of frights. Not surprisingly, expectations for *Doom 3*—the series' first real sequel in nearly a decade—are exceedingly high. We've no doubt the game will look brilliantly f**ked-up, but with the graphical and atmospheric bar raised to unbelievable heights in the years since its debut, id Software has much to prove. After our hands-on with the PC version of the game, we'd say id is more than ready to take gamers to hell and back once more.

Another storyless fragfest from id?

id Software maintains that *Doom 3* will be anything but plot deficient. They've fleshed out *Doom*'s typically storyless, sophomoric, Satan-obsessed backdrops by hiring full-time sci-fi writer Matthew Costello, whose past experience includes scenario work on the classic PC adventure games *11th hour* and *The 7th Guest*, both renowned for their superb narratives.

Set on a distant Mars outpost, *Doom 3* begins with a top-secret experiment gone awry at the United Aerospace Corporation laboratories. And as Murphy's Law would have it, a gate to hell is unleashed on the unsuspecting colony, causing all manner of mammals to mutate into...whoops, demons.

Ah, so another storyless fragfest from id then.

Yes and no. id Software breaks tradition by slowing down the pace of its latest sequel. *Doom 3* seems like a crawl compared to its run-and-gun predecessors. With new rendering technology in place, the game world has become infinitely more detailed and interactive, allowing you to really use the environment during combat. Mirrors and windows reflect enemies around the corner, while shooting out lights allows you to set traps for some one-on-one action in the dark.

What about Xbox Live support?

This resulting shift from relentless demon slaying to more methodical and strategic gameplay will also tone things down for multiplayer. Like its PC brethren, expect *Doom 3* to hit Xbox Live with a four-player (team) deathmatch limit. Why the disappointingly low number of players? id wants to build tension by forcing players to make ample use of environments, shadows, and their ol' noggins.

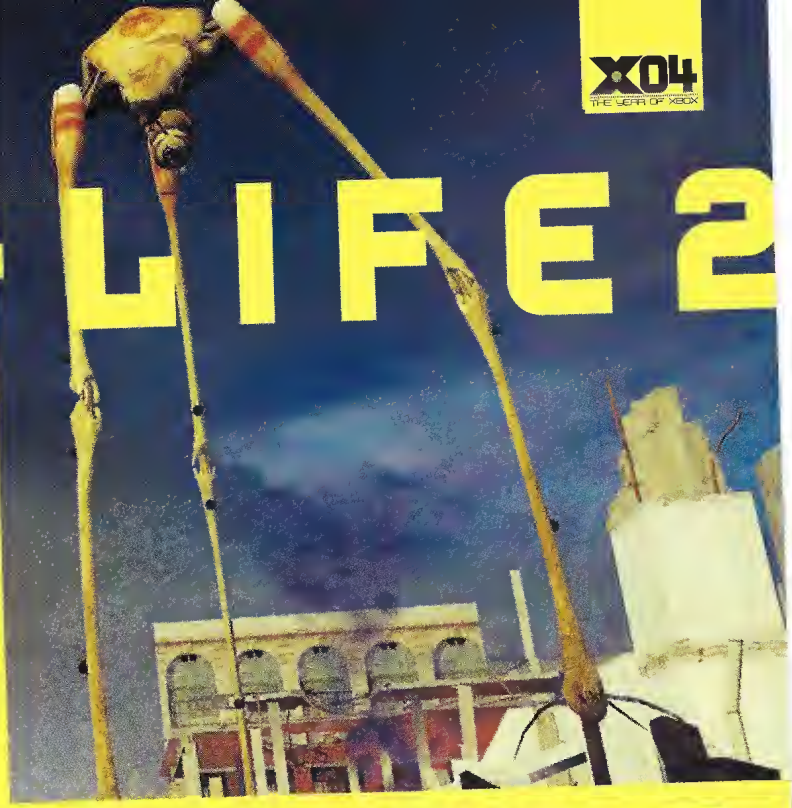
Data

Dev: id Software • Pub: Activision • Release: Fall

The Architect

According to lead programmer John Carmack, *Doom 3*'s graphics engine will be "the defacto 3D engine" for the next five years. Talking out his ass? Maybe. But expect to see this gorgeous engine powering *Quake 4* in late 2004. After *Doom 3*, Carmack will spend the next five years skinny dipping in a tub of Jell-O with his wife.

HALF-LIFE 2



Half the life, twice the fun

Half-Life 2 could shape up to be the greatest sequel to one of the best games ever made—that is, if and when it finally ships in 2004. After a lengthy delay, no thanks to hacker attacks and stolen unfinished PC code on developer Valve's internal Web site, publicity for this game has all but disappeared.

But what exactly is the big deal surrounding *Half-Life 2*?

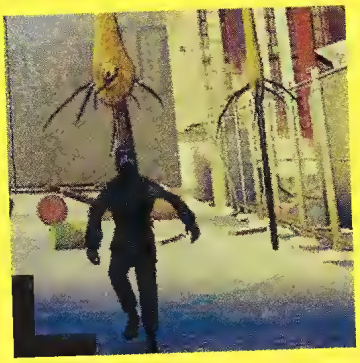
When the game was previewed in May 2003, games journalists were on their knees with praise about *Half-Life 2*'s mind-blowing graphics, revolutionary gameplay, and next-generation enemy A.I. It looked as if gaming was, at last, on the cusp of a new paradigm. But Valve has already missed its promised PC release date of late 2003, and now the console version is officially in limbo, having been confirmed by Valve that the game will indeed hit Xbox as an exclusive sometime in 2004.

So, there's an illegal version of the game out there.

Yes, and word on the street from those naughty, illicit souls who have actually played the stolen, incomplete version of the game, is that the game does indeed live up to the hype—even if some of the brilliant A.I. behavior first shown was heavily prescripted for effect.

With *Halo 2* just around the corner, does *Half-Life 2* still matter?

Although there's no doubt *Half-Life 2* is a PC thoroughbred, its eventual release on Xbox this year could be the console's biggest exclusive since *Halo*, giving Microsoft a much-needed boost in numbers after an all-around disappointing 2003 holiday season. But have no doubt that this game will simply own consumers and critics alike in '04.



Data
Dev: Valve • Pub: Vivendi • Release: Winter

FAR CRY

Shedding tears of joy on Xbox Live

Doom 3 this, *Half-Life 2* that. With everyone looking forward to big-name first-person shooters in 2004, *Far Cry* can't seem to catch a break. But here's why this PC and Xbox sleeper has the potential to be a bona fide killer on both platforms. Not only does *Far Cry* sport a new and powerful 3D engine (on PC) capable of rendering huge outdoor environments and worldly physics without a hitch, but also some seriously lifelike enemy A.I., giving players plenty of dynamic firefights.

It's all about the technology, isn't it?

The features list is downright impressive, featuring seamless jungle island environments; a variety of vehicles to commandeer; and unpredictable botlike A.I. that hunt and ambush like professional killers.

Meanwhile, on Xbox Live....

Ubisoft hasn't confirmed what *Far Cry* will feature online, but expectations are that besides team deathmatch modes, it'll also deliver goal-based scenarios and co-op play.

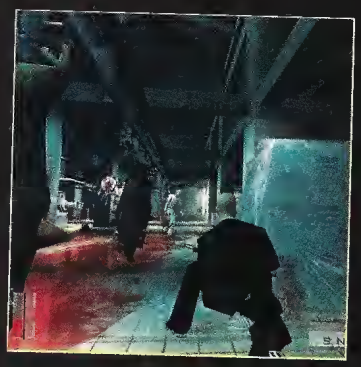
Data
[illegible]

HITMAN: CONTRACTS

Now if you'll just sign on the dotted line...

One of the neat things about economic recovery is that it applies to everybody, especially our friends in the world of organized crime. It's the near future and the economy has rebounded; jobs are being created, and when there are jobs, there are also people who need killing—enter once more Agent 47.

Can't we all just get along? Apparently not, as our hero failed to morally cleanse himself at the conclusion of *Hitman 2*. This time, Agent 47's found himself a brand-new kind of trouble in gay Paris, home of Le Big Mac. Expect Mr. 47 to reluctantly (isn't he always?), but oh-so efficiently dispatch hordes of undeserving Frenchmen.



Killing is bad for the psyche. A major component of *Contracts* appears to be the tenuous, if not completely fragile, mental state of Agent 47. Playing through the game from the antihero's perspective, you'll be able to see firsthand just how a day's worth of murder messes with your mind. Janos Flösser, managing director of IO Interactive, promises that *Contracts* "will be epic, highly disturbing, but most importantly an enjoyable experience." Combining the psychotic and enjoyment into one deadly package...where do we sign?

Very bald, and very tardy. Originally slated for spring, *Contracts* has since been delayed for a fall 2004 release date. Bummed? Yes. But let's face it, there are plenty of other games to play in the meantime.

Data
Dev: I/O Interactive • Pub: Eidos • Release: Fall

CALL OF DUTY: FINEST HOUR

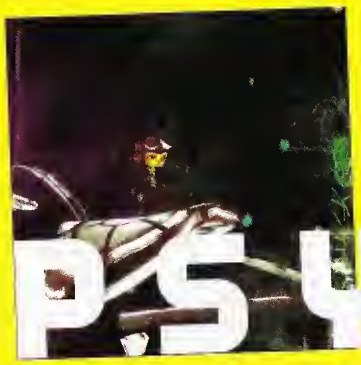
The *Band of Brothers* of WWII gaming

For years, the *Medal of Honor* series has garnered Purple Hearts from critics for recreating frantic World War II action. But lack of innovation in the series has paved the way for an infinitely better WWII series—*Call of Duty*.

Yeah, but do we need another nostalgic WWII-themed shooter? Maybe not, but for fans of historical shooters, *Duty* is a new pinnacle of the subgenre. By using a seamless combination of prescripted events and capable A.I., *Duty* is full of intense, bigger-than-life moments easily on the level of *Medal of Honor*'s Omaha beach landing or Pearl Harbor defense missions.

What about the Xbox version? *Duty* on Xbox will be entirely new. The game will feature use and control of vehicles that was missing entirely from its PC counterpart.

Data
Dev: Spark Unlimit. • Pub: Activision • Rel: Fall



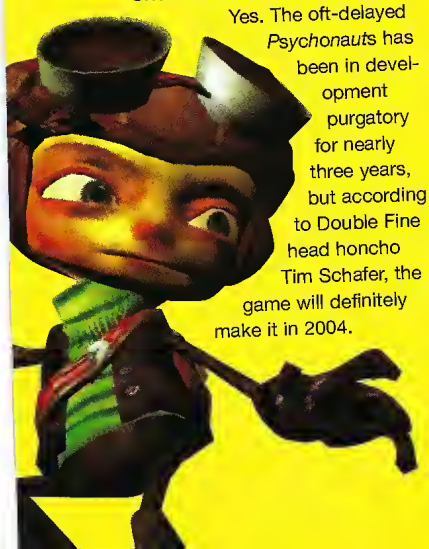
PSYCHONAUTS

Like *Mario 64*, except Bowser's on Zoloft and you're his shrink

Psychonauts brings with it the potential to either resurrect a genre on the verge of becoming irrelevant or fall flat on its face without so much as a whimper. The recipe is relatively simple: *Psychonauts* tells a complex, psychological tale within the strict confines of the established platformer genre. Players take control of lead Psychonaut Raz, and the bulk of the experience takes place inside the dysfunctional psyches of the individual characters he encounters.

I remember reading about this one around the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Is it still on its way?

Yes. The oft-delayed *Psychonauts* has been in development purgatory for nearly three years, but according to Double Fine head honcho Tim Schafer, the game will definitely make it in 2004.



So why all the delays?

Double Fine is working on what might be called an "indie" game, and Microsoft understands that success or failure for a title such as this may come down to a millisecond difference in the timing of a double-jump.

Think Double Fine can pull it off?

Not sure, but we'll find out soon. *Psychonauts* has superb art direction, an original concept, and Tim Schafer behind the scenes, a designer who has already proven himself to be an exceptional writer of dialogue and characters. Whether he and his team have the capacity to create refined console-style gameplay, however, remains to be seen.

Dev: Double Fine • Pub: Microsoft • Rel: Winter

STEEL BATTALION: LINE OF CONTACT

Operation Shock and Awe Yourself on Live

Capcom is on the verge of unleashing *Line of Contact*, an Xbox Live add-on to *Steel Battalion*, its $200 mech simulator game that comes with its own massive 40-button dashboard and three metal foot pedals.

Sounds hardcore...and expensive.

This March, Capcom will re-release the original *Battalion* at the same steep price point. Fans who already own this $200 goliath can purchase *Contact* separately to play online. Total price for a newbie? $300, including the Xbox Live subscription.

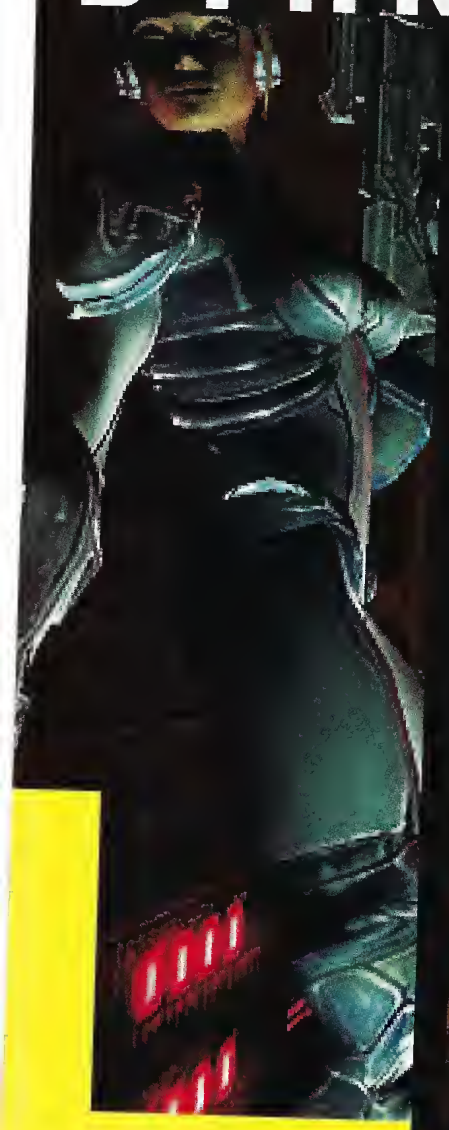
That's really, really expensive.

It's pricey, to be sure. But *Contact* is both compelling and innovative. It features four-on-four matches where the outcome of every battle affects a persistent online war.

Data

STARCRAFT: GHOST

Meet the ghostess with the mostest



A lot has happened since Blizzard first unlocked the storm shutters and announced *StarCraft: Ghost* in 2002. By "a lot," of course, we mainly mean *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell*, which single-handedly revived the stealth genre out of thin air. However, Nova—the heroine of Blizzard's tactical action game—has plenty of tricks and gadgets up her combat bra to thrill both fans of *StarCraft* and stealth.

So what's *Ghost* about?

Think of it as a futuristic *Splinter Cell* set in the world of *StarCraft*, that oldie-but-goodie strategy game that's sold seven million copies worldwide. Nova is a Ghost, a combat unit specializing in espionage and the art of ass-kicking without being detected; and she's on the search for terrazine gas, a mysterious chemical that's sought by Terrans, Zerg, and Protoss alike.

But it's pretty much *Splinter Cell* with *StarCraft* skins, right?

A fair question. On the surface, they share many similarities—Nova infiltrates enemy bases, hides in shadows, balances on tightropes, and extinguishes lives the same way Sam Fisher does. But, uh, she's a lot slinkier, for one (no offense to Mr. Fisher). More important, though, Nova's method of operation is a bit more straightforward. She's got a ton of offense on her side: besides the guns and grenades, she's got Psi powers that let her become invisible, slow down time, and detect hostiles through walls. If things get hairy, she can even call on battlecruiser and siege tank squads to clean house for her. As such, the missions in *Ghost* require equal doses of stealth and ammunition to survive. You'll often begin by playing sniper, targeting hapless infantry from afar and popping them in the dome when they lower their armored visors. When detected, however, you bust out the heat, including automatic gauss rifles and silenced gauss pistols.

How faithful is this game to the *StarCraft* universe?

Very. While *Ghost* and *StarCraft* are set in the same universe, absolutely zero resource management will be found here. Not to say that fans of the old PC game won't immediately feel at home—Blizzard's taken great pains to keep the story line consistent with *StarCraft*, to the point where nearly every weapon and enemy you run into has a direct counterpart in the original game.

Data

Dev: Nihilistic • Pub: Blizzard • Release: Fall

Nearly **every weapon, vehicle and enemy** you run into has a counterpart in the original *StarCraft*.

The Invisible Femme

Just like in the PC game, Nova has the ability to cloak, making her effectively invisible for a decent amount of time. Although cloaking is a great way to get the jump on your enemies, you still need to take care with your attacks. Shooting or touching enemies automatically negates your active camoflauge.

HALO 2

Return of the king...

Halo 2. Sequel to the sci-fi mega-hit most of us bought an Xbox to play, the arrival of which will be heralded with trumpets and children dancing in the streets. This is the one game we all want to know more about, the one game...**Microsoft won't talk about?** Well, not lately, anyway. A year ago we got the first details: Full Xbox Live multiplayer support (where you play as human troops or Covenant aliens): melee attack combos; the ability to run and shoot two guns at once; destructible environments, smarter bad guys, new weapons, new vehicles—you name it.

Sounds good so far. What else? Plot-wise, *Halo 2* will focus on Master Chief's mission to stop the Covenant's march towards Mother Earth, then follow Chief as he takes the battle back to the alien home worlds. Then, there's the gameplay in motion we saw last May (check halo.bungie.net to see the video yourself); gorgeous and detailed, the graphics made even the stellar first game look dated. And then...nothing. One, maybe two new screenshots in the last six months. Yet despite the blackout (or perhaps because of it), *Halo 2* retains a level of anticipation and excitement akin to the return of Jesus. Or the Beatles. Or Jesus returning to jam with the Beatles.

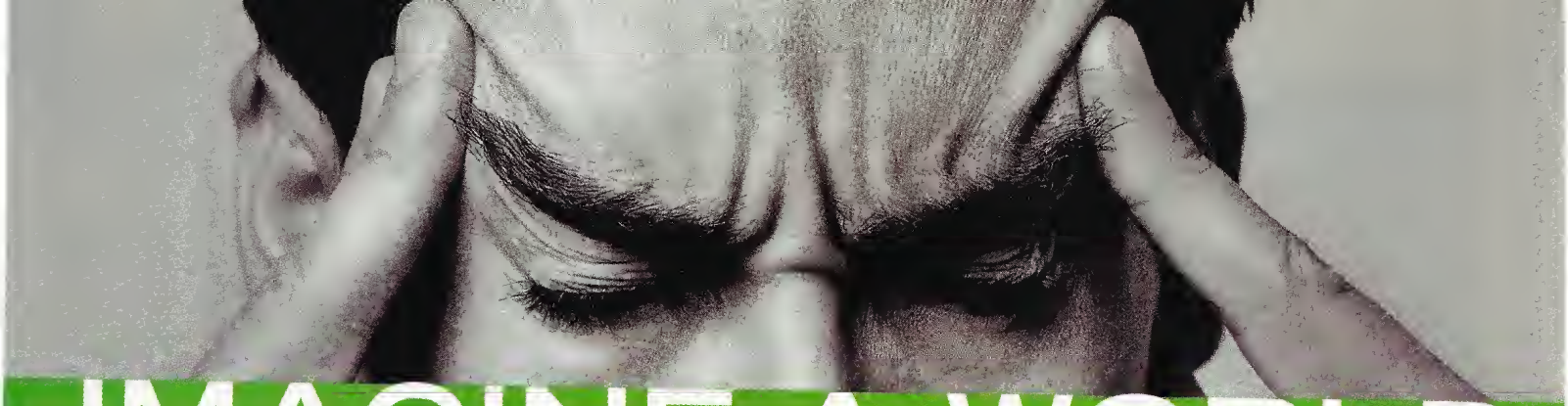
Is it really coming out this spring? Well, this is where things get sticky. The short answer is no. Though Microsoft promised a release in early 2004, all that developer Bungie ever said was "not in 2003." And, well, here it's February, and we still haven't heard jack. In fact, it wouldn't surprise us if we saw a near-complete *Halo 2* at the Electronic Entertainment Expo this May. One thing is for sure—you simply can't rush a masterpiece.

Data
Dev: Bungie • Pub: Microsoft • Release: Summer

X04: XBOX LIVE

Absolute Online Domination

Xbox Live began modestly enough. Microsoft's online gaming network launched in 2002 with a handful of essential action titles and garnered enough support to make Sony look twice. But the numbers by the end of winter 2003 tell a different story—as early as mid-year, the service had already established half-a-million paid subscribers. Microsoft's Xbox czar Robbie Bach is [illegible] about Live. "We think we'll have 3 million [illegible] by next June," he says. Each title that [illegible] will see the beginnings of an Xbox Live/PC [illegible] integration. How will they achieve these numbers, you ask? With killer apps like *Halo 2*, *Rainbow Six 4*, and *True Fantasy Live Online*, by winter 2004, Microsoft will be the victor for round one of the online war.



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101 World Championship Pool 2004
101 Silent Scope Complete
101 Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon

How we rate

Being a single-format magazine, we at *Xbox Nation* find ourselves in the difficult situation of critiquing games that reside on Xbox, while not blinding ourselves to the sphere of console gaming surrounding it. We will make a point to put each game in context of both its platform and videogames at large, whenever possible.

Our scale is a rigid one to 10; in an industry where the independent spirit is often kicked maliciously to the curb, and games are often prematurely rushed out the door in the name of quarterly earnings, we believe it's an important time to be critical. And while the burden certainly weighs heavily upon our shoulders as reviewers, it is infinitely heavier on the consumers' backs. In this day of shallow profit margins, wallets speak volumes. Allow us to break it down for the folks in the cheap seats: One is video feces. Two is trash. Three is junk. Four is subpar. Five is average. Six is slightly above. Seven is very solid. Eight's a real gem. Nine is amazing. Ten is *Halo*.

Our most important requirement is that a game bring something new to the table. And yet, while innovative forms of interaction come first, we don't scoff at technology so cutting edge it makes our noses bleed or gameplay that refines a pre-existing formula into something so supple it bleeds itself, either. Titles failing to distinguish themselves in one of these crucial ways are—in our opinion—quite easily dismissed, especially at 50 bucks a pop.

REVIEWING THE REVIEWS

Much ado about mules...

It was, to quote the eminent bard Weird Al Yankovic, a Christmas at ground zero. Everyone and their mother released games for Xbox this holiday season, and with visions of $$$ dancing in their heads, a harsh lesson was learned: *If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride.*

There are, to put it bluntly, a lot of rotting mule carcasses in this particular issue of *Xbox Nation*. This holiday season was a dumping ground, and a lot of very good videogames got buried under a pile of junk. Call for the mule doctor if you will, but a great deal of the games reviewed this issue were, simply, dead on arrival.

For every *Project Gotham Racing 2*, there was a *Ford Racing 2* and *Maximum Chase*. For every *NHL Rivals*, players were visited by *Freestyle Street Soccer* and an *Ultimate Beach Soccer*. For every *Beyond Good & Evil* and *Prince of Persia*, someone thought they would be complemented by the mediocre-to-dreadful *Battlestar Galactica*, *Spawn Armageddon*, *Cat in the Hat*, *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, and *Dinosaur Hunting*.

Now that the drek and dead wood has been cleared, *XBN*'s reviewers are looking forward to a very merry and mule-free 2004.

JAMES BOND 007: EVERYTHING OR NOTHING

License to impress

■ "Let's negotiate, Mr. Bond! Perhaps over tea and scones?"

By making *James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing* a third-person adventure rather than a first-person shooter, the developers have attempted to create a gameplay experience bearing all the hallmarks of James Bond films. They recruited a constellation of movie stars to lend their visages and voices to the game's characters. They even hired the screenwriter of recent 007 films to pen the game's story. While it may not please shooter fans hoping for the second coming of *GoldenEye*, for the rest of us, *Nothing* is the most authentic 007 game yet.

As Bond, players shoot a lot of bad guys (of course), pistol-whip them, slam them into walls, sneak up and choke them, and eliminate them with Q's gadgets. These alternate methods of mayhem truly bring the Bond experience to life. Sadly, because henchmen run in cliques of three to five, it's usually a lot easier just to shoot the bastards, instead of, say, knocking a guy on the head with a wrench and throwing punches at his now-alerted cohorts. Nevertheless, if you're up to the challenge, you can indeed do whatever Bond would do.

The main thing he does, of course, is fight maniacal supervillains. Meet Nikolai Diavolo, a Bond antagonist of the old school, who possesses no bizarre disfigurement or superhuman powers—just a surefire plan for world domination. His lieutenants, too, are worthy foils for Bond: A Russian mad scientist, a couple of minions in New Orleans as unsavory as cat-gut gumbo, and perhaps the most famous Bond baddie, Jaws, who poses a formidable pugilistic puzzle for our disarmed 007.

Punching Jaws' iron stomach is just one great gameplay moment that the game's shift to third-person perspective allows. Players also get to throw Bond off a cliff after a free-falling love interest, jump over all manner of obstacles in cars and on motorcycles, fly a helicopter, drive a tank, and rappel face-first down a burning dam.

For the most part, *Nothing* makes performing these Bondian stunts easy, with its intuitive controls, friendly camera, good level design, and clearly-defined goals. But the inventory system could use some work: Why not separate guns from gadgets so that when one gat's ammo runs out, players can switch to another weapon without scrolling through explosive coins, thermovision, and the rappelling device? Please.

■ ProTip: Remember to make a witty pun after dispatching a foe. Here, we recommend dryly commenting "Nice of you to drop in" or "He was at the end of his rope." Delicious!

James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing looks, sounds and feels like Bond. **Mission accomplished.**

Furthermore, the lock-on system sometimes feels finicky, since it's based on what Bond—not players—can see. So it's not possible to target the plain-as-day thug at center screen without moving Bond first. And when James is hugging a wall Solid Snake-style, the safest place a henchman can be is directly in front of him: Bond adamantly refuses to aim forward until the button canceling his wall-sneaking is pressed. Would 007 sit there like a lump and swallow slugs from some chump right in front of his face? It's safe to say no.

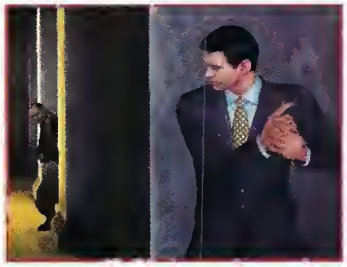
That said, it's hard to gripe about the excellent vehicle levels. Fine controls and cleverly branching (and merging) paths make these a joy to play. There's even a level in which you use your car's limited cloaking device to "sneak" from one side of a villa to the other. Very clever, Mr. Bond.

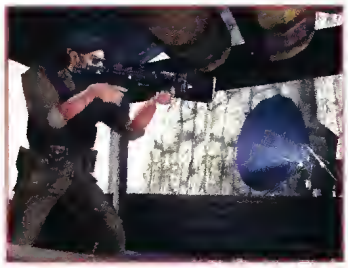
In short, *Nothing* looks, sounds, and feels like Bond. Mission accomplished.

Paul V. Byrnes

Eight out of Ten

Dev: EA Redwood Shores
Pub: EA Games
Players: 1-4
Superspy: Superfly
Origin: Redwood City, CA
Online: No





■ This walking-on-walls thing was done a lot better by Adam West and Burt Ward in the now-classic *Batman* TV show. Of course, West and Ward were walking normally in front of a camera on its side.

Replay, Mr. Bond?

James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing isn't very long, but does offer impressive replay value. The *Power Stone*-esque multiplayer free-for-all provides a nice alternative to replaying the game at higher difficulty levels, and the cooperative campaign, which serves as a prologue to the main adventure, is a fair gas to play.

TRUE CRIME: STREETS OF L.A.

Grand Theft Oughta.

Dev: Luxoflux
Pub: Activision
Players: 1
Punching: Shooting
Origin: Los Angeles, CA
Online: No

■ Tip: Players can unlock Snoop Dogg and cruise L.A. in a pimped-out convertible, complete with hydraulics. (Known as Dogg Patrol mode).

True Crime is Activision's answer to the colossally successful *Grand Theft Auto* series, and at first glance, one can scarcely spot differences. All of the familiar elements are here: sprawling urban cityscapes, incessant violence and, of course, ample quantities of grand theft auto. Most essentially, *Crime* allows for the ability to freely roam anywhere in the game's digital rendition of Los Angeles and smash/kill/destroy more or less anything in sight.

Rather than an anonymous gangster à la *Theft*, players control semi-undercover LAPD officer Nick Kang as he investigates a series of Chinatown bombings. The game follows a more structured narrative and attempts to apply consequence to one's actions. A Good/Bad Cop score measures your ethics as a police officer and shifts based on your actions: A carefully placed shot to the leg of a fleeing suspect will raise this score, while a fatal head shot will lower it. The story changes depending on what kind of cop you are; dip low enough and both citizens and fellow police officers will attempt to take you out. Reward Points are gained by "solving" missions (read: punching and shooting all the right people in all the right places); these points are then traded for new gun tricks, car moves, and fighting abilities.

These meters, machinations, and moral assessments are well and good,

■ Note to Nick Kang, police cop: Max Payne called and wants his shtick, blood-stained grimace, and steely-eyed stare back. Pronto.

The *True Crime* universe feels **emotionally and psychologically barren**—and, therefore, inconsequential.

certainly, but a deep-seated problem underpins all of them: Essentially, everything—from the writing to the coding to the level design—simply feels B-rate. Mr. Kang's tirade of cop-drama clichés becomes very old very quickly, and while several of the game's cinematic nods are cleverly done, most just come across as hackneyed and dull. Despite its best intentions to apply weight to the player's actions, *Crime*'s universe feels emotionally and psychologically barren—and, therefore, inconsequential.

It's not for lack of trying; this is a true Hollywood crossover production with voice acting by Christopher Walken and Gary Oldman, a professionally penned branching script, and a soundtrack with tracks from 90 percent of the West Coast gangsta rap community. The hand-to-hand combat and gunplay are both significantly better than those found in Rockstar's finest, and the driving mechanics are certainly up to task.

Sadly, the engine is simply wrought with too many seams, too much faulty A.I., and a metanarrative drenched in enough cheese to kill a lactose-intolerant horse. The result is a play experience that delves into the patently ridiculous just a tad too often. *Crime* provides enough unhinged madness to entertain and is worthy of a rental. Classic material, however, this is not.

Evan Shamoon

Six out of Ten

True Crimes

One of the more interesting aspects of *True Crime*'s game structure is the random crime generator. Essentially, you'll be riding around Los Angeles in your drop top, and you'll receive a call on your radio that a robbery/car jacking/meat cleaver incident is going down nearby. It's your choice whether you want to deal with these petty crimes, with the incentive for Nick Kang being a better reputation, better skills, and the like.

■ Tommy "Machine Gun" Johnson would be extremely embarrassed a mere three hours later when, without realizing it, he arrived at his date with Sandy "AK-47" Lee, with Nick Kang still stuck to his chin.

GRAND THEFT AUTO DOUBLE PACK

Bring forth the hookers and the blow!

Dev: Rockstar Vienna
Pub: Rockster Games
Players: 1
Jeck: Me Up
Origin: Austria
Online: No

■ Here, we see a dedicated criminal taking a fire engine to the red-light district to put out a hunka hunka burning love.

Great statesmen of the day, perhaps plucking inspiration from the words of patriot Patrick Henry, have spoken clearly: Give us Liberty and give us Vice. And so it happened that when Rockstar Games packaged its video megalopolises Liberty City and Vice City together and shipped them out for Xbox, the heavens smiled and the common man received his just reward. And although the Liberty and the Vice were good on PlayStation 2, they are greater still on Xbox.

Grand Theft Auto Double Pack holds updated versions of the seminal videogames *Grand Theft Auto III* and *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* packaged on separate disks and sold for the price of one game. Both games stand as simple marvels for the freedom they present to players: As an unrepentant thug, it's possible to explore huge cities; pilot many vehicles; become an ambulance driver, hack, vigilante, assassin, or even a strip-club owner; perform missions; or simply do...whatever. Huge game environments at once become fertile, hooker-laden playgrounds.

As sweeping crime epics, both games hold up remarkably well. Players can accept missions from various criminal major-domos, and the assignments run the gamut from the outright felonious to merely thuggish. Challenges can be accepted whenever the urge hits and replayed until completed; the game never locks anyone into a single route. Obstacles can be overcome with creativity instead of by figuring out the developers' intended solution and aping it.

■ Fun Fact: All the members of the *Xbox Nation* staff actually lived through the pastel, neon-laden hell that wes the 1980s. One of us even did so wearing leg warmers. Now let us never speek of it again.

Huge game environments at once become fertile, hooker-laden playgrounds.

For Xbox, graphical enhancements allow for better lighting effects, with the top of cars glowing a soft green or red as they pass underneath traffic signals. CDs may now be ripped to the Xbox hard drive so players can create their own soundtracks, augmenting or outright replacing the games' very excellent music. Texture reinsertion techniques have been employed, giving game characters in the Xbox versions a smoother appearance than their PlayStation 2 and PC counterparts. It's a small victory seeing *Vice City*'s Tommy Vercetti appear with individual fingers instead of a meaty club.

Both games' inherent brilliance remains intact. As playgrounds, they're marvelous. As experiences, they're undeniably powerful. Even after being beaten, players can return to either game and enjoy the simple fun of a hijacked car and a balls-to-the-wall race against angry cops. In the bundling, Rockstar has taken two great tastes and made them one, and any score less than 10 for the *Double Pack* would be outright criminal.

Greg Orlando

Grand Theft Idea

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery—and the Internet does, in fact, make this supposition—then *The Simpsons Hit & Run* and *True Crime: Streets of L.A.* are not so much outright swipes of *Grand Theft Auto*'s play as they are delightful tips of the video hat in an attempt at making more money than Croesus.

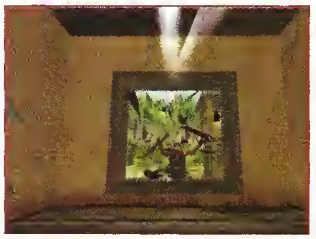
■ The Fatalist, having been fired from his job as a poorly named videogame character in a mediocre fighter, picked up an automatic rifle and fulfilled his lifelong dream of become a post-office employee.

Ten out of Ten

COUNTER-STRIKE

Dev: Valve
Pub: Microsoft
Players: 1-16

Fire: And Forget
Origin: Bellevue, WA
Online: Yes



■ Joe preferred the Overcompensator rifle to the M-16 because it made him feel like a big man.

Counter-Strike on Xbox proves if you build an online killing field, the kids will come and slaughter one another mercilessly. Valve's team-based shooter, which debuted on PC as a free *Half-Life* mod, is an official disappointment on Xbox, yet the game's undying popularity defies critical analysis.

Strike's defiantly crappy graphics may be a by-product of the game's garage development legacy, but it's the disregard for a compelling single-player experience—outside of staging faux online matches with highly intelligent A.I. bots—that boggles the mind. One gets the impression Valve intentionally left out a campaign mode to bolster *Strike*'s identity as an online shooter. But as it stands, playing this game without the benefit of Xbox Live is the absolute pits. Enemy bots, while exhibiting some lifelike traits, either miss their target by a mile or never fail to score direct hits—neither of which is a reflection of *Strike*'s online reality.

Despite these shortcomings, the game remains solid due to its break-neck pace and flawless controls.

Thanks to balanced weapons, maps, and team goals (hostage rescues and bomb defusals), *Strike* is still the only online shooter generating a trademark blend of relentless tension and twitchy *Quake*-inspired combat.

Although the game pales in comparison to *Rainbow Six 3* in almost every respect, there's enough of a gameplay distinction here to warrant a purchase—albeit, just not at full price.

Che Chou

Seven out of Ten

DINOSAUR HUNTING

Dev: Microsoft
Pub: Metro 3D
Players: 1

Dinosaur: Jr.
Origin: Japan
Online: No

■ ProTip: Once you're done tranquilizing these dinosaurs, have a tranquilizer for yourself. You've earned it!

If *Dinosaur Hunting* is any indication, it's no wonder Microsoft is struggling in Japan. Trying to appeal to Japanese gamers, it's cooked up a slow-paced dinosaur-hunting game more about tracking a quarry than blasting it with rockets. It's not a bad idea, but the whole affair is half-assed.

The story barely establishes the setting (1910, somewhere tropical). The developers might as well have written, "We like the idea of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, but we didn't have time to read the whole book." After wandering *Hunting*'s clumsy virtual world for a few hours, you understand what the designers intended: suffering.

You're supposed to sneak around looking for footprints or droppings, stalking one species of dinosaur. If you find a dead specimen or a big pile of feces from your quarry, rejoice! because you now know how to mix your tranquilizer darts. Mixing darts is done in the confusing menu system; then you can hope to hell the game loads the right ammo when you're face-to-face with a 20-ton reptile.

This game doesn't have rough

edges, it is rough edges. You have to press and hold three buttons (in sequence!) to fire your shotgun. When you're checking tracks and the unskippable little cut-scene plays, dinosaurs are free to approach and maul you. All dinos (even herbivores) charge directly toward you once you're spotted.

Avoid *Hunting* as you would the 500-pound dinosaur turds figuring so prominently in the game's design.

Paul V. Byrnes

Three out of Ten

BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

Dev: Warthog Pub: VU Games Players: 1 Cylon: Cyclone Origin: England Online: No

Ah, to be young and Lorne Greene again.

Battlestar Galactica arrived just in time for the 25th anniversary of the late-'70s TV show, as well as for the premiere of a sexed-up new Sci-Fi channel series. (For mythos' sake: The game borrows from both shows, with you playing as a spry version of Greene's Commander Adama while the ship designs are swiped from the new series.)

Although *Galactica* packs visuals lightyears ahead of the creaky old show's effects, it's not a consistently fun experience. Blame the cumbersome controls, which runneth over with targeting, thrust, and missile-tweaking options, but fails to offer vital functions such as letting you lock on to targets in your crosshairs. It makes surviving one turret-manning level that has you defending the *Galactica* from a torpedo swarm more a matter of luck rather than skill. Compound that with a hard-to-decipher radar and you get unnecessarily frustrating escort missions, in which friendly ships get gang-blasted while you're scrambling to figure out where to fly.

■ No, this moldy-license space shooter didn't slide through some wormhole in space-time.

And that's really the major malfunction here: busted level design. Many missions suffer from unclear objectives or load you up with tiresome chores—such as seven minutes of formation flight—only to have you repeat these tasks ad nauseam if you foul up. It's all so odd, because developer Warthog is usually an ace in this genre. Of course, if you're a fan of the show, *Galactica* probably had you at the part about playing as a young Greene.

Crispin Boyer

Six out of Ten

TERMINATOR 3: RISE OF THE MACHINES

Dev: Black Ops Entertainment Pub: Atari Players: 1 Rise: And Fall Origin: Santa Monica, CA Online: No

During the dark times of the gaming industry (circa 1990), the compact disc brought demons, drills, and Dana Plato into full-motion video glory, but sacrificed all gameplay and fun in the process. Atari and Black Ops continue this tradition in today's age of photorealistic rendering by delivering the terminally tiresome *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*.

The main FPS gameplay will have players convinced their Controller-S has broken buttons. Response time is sluggish, and, during the title's handful of simplistic third-person perspective "fighting game" sequences, results in the TX pummeling your face into the concrete for the 12th time in a row.

Graphics are dated, with flat textures and jerky destruction animations showing tanks and Hunter-Killers going from completely intact to rubble with no in-between damage progression. Some even simply disappear instantly, like doughnuts in front of a sumo wrestler. The entire audio portion feels abandoned, as entire groups of sounds (walking in particular) seem to be missing. If loud metallic bangs are your

■ As it turns out, that thing on Arnold's arm was, in fact, a tumor.

thing, however, this game's got those in abundance. The score is fantastic, of course, but only because it was composed for the *Terminator 3* film.

Machines sports everything that can go bad with game development, and sends players back via transmogrified technology to a time when FMV ruled the school. Go easy on yourself here, and watch the only FMV worth watching: the DVD of the film this mercury-like pile of T-1000 excrement is based on.

Russell Garbutt

Two out of Ten

CAT IN THE HAT

Dev: Magenta Software Pub: VU Games Players: 1 Cat: Ain't that Origin: England Online: Yes

The marketing shills at Vivendi Universal know zany. For them, it's a matter of combining a classic children's book with an over-the-top Mike Myers action comedy to make the craziest videogame ever. *Cat in the Hat*, a "Seussian" action-adventure game takes you (as The Cat) through various worlds intertwined by the idea of household objects gone awry.

The game may be wacky at times, but "Seussian" is a stretch and "good" is even more of one. Gone are the rhyming couplets and lovable characters, replaced by a bitchy goldfish that berates you at every turn. Mike Myers, as the stovepipe-hatted feline, contributes scads of reject catchphrases from John Candy movies of the late '80s. And who could forget the classic Seussian villain Alec Baldwin—oops, Mr. Quinn—who has an evil plan to do unspeakable things?

Among the more enjoyable (and some might say Mario-esque) powers include trampolining to absurd heights, gliding in midair by use of your umbrella, and firing encapsulating bubbles at pygmy brontosaurs or

■ Remember, kids, to always spay AND neuter your pets. Twice.

blowfish. You can then fire the bubble-encased carcass into a "goo machine" that spits out a glowing purple "goo-ball" you can use to explode obstacles. Did they have those in 1957?

Ask not whether Theodore "Dr. Seuss" Geisel will be rolling over in his grave, but whether kids will think this obnoxious tripe is cool. They will not. This giant cat that wants to pinch mommy's ass is one ripe for the highway and an oncoming truck.

Chris Varmus

Four out of Ten

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE—OPERATION SURMA

Dev: Paradigm Entertainment Pub: Atari Players: 1 Mission: Accept It Origin: Carrollton, TX Online: No

You'd think that *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell* was the formula for crack, finest of all the heart-exploding drugs. As with *Rogue Ops* before it, *Mission: Impossible—Operation Surma* desperately tries to ape the look and addictive flavor of the *Cell* franchise.

While nowhere near as graphically polished as its obvious inspiration, this game does comport itself surprisingly well. Clever objectives abound, requiring Ethan Hunt to exploit a wide array of gadgets and doodads. You can stalk in style with discreet, mosquito-sized flying cameras, or go all Spider-Man using the game's most inspired toy, the micro cord. Throughout, verbal backup comes from the ever-reliable Ving Rhames, who was also featured in the films.

Surma feels like a legitimate extension of the *Impossible* films. The story is more interesting and more cleanly told than *Cell*'s, and small touches, such as the Limp Bizkit guitar riff from *M: I-2*, resonate throughout. This title is a big step up from Atari's slap-in-the-face disappointments *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* and *Enter the Matrix*.

As for the learning curve: think of this

■ No one gets out of the sleeper hold, except for Dick Clark. He's escaped death for decades.

game as *Splinter Cell for Dummies*. The parameters of *Surma*'s missions are very forgiving, especially when it comes to dealing with alarms. Set off as many as you want, just make sure you turn them off in 30 seconds. It's less time consuming in this game to stash dead bodies, and you can (finally) tangle with enemies using your fists. In a crowded new year with a new Sam Fisher adventure in sight but not seemingly arriving soon enough, Atari's clone will do just fine.

Ethan Einhorn

Six out of Ten

NBA INSIDE DRIVE 2004

Dev: High Voltage Software Pub: Microsoft Players: 1-8 Drive: Away Origin: Redmond, WA Online: Yes

If you like to dunk—and really, what mortal doesn't?—*NBA Inside Drive 2004* is for you. Dunk left. Dunk right. Drive down the lane and dunk. Slice up the baseline and dunk. Dunk with giant Yao Ming or dunk with midget Earl Boykins. Dunk! Dunk! Dunk! Yawn.

Surely some schlub in the *Drive* think tank thought dunking equals excitement equals ($$$ cha-ching!) sales, which is why any gravity-deprived scrub can do a double-pump reverse jam in this surprisingly mediocre product. *Drive* isn't a terrible basketball game or, for that matter, bad. But it offers nothing new to a genre that, thanks to EA Sports and Sega, needs no further candidates.

Or, put simply, *Drive* is Xbox Live-enabled Tab when there's already Coke and Pepsi. The player controls are like the other games, except free-throw shooting is a bit more annoying. The physical features of the athletes are sharp, but not quite sharp enough to find realism (Can anyone explain why Kobe Bryant looks like Denzel Washington, circa *The Preacher's Wife*?). The arenas have screaming fans and bland PA announcers, but, well, who doesn't? While other games have commentators such as the legendary Marv Albert, here you've got Marques "Can I Speak Six Words Without Dropping A Cliché?" Johnson.

As with other Microsoft sports titles thus far, *Drive*'s biggest asset is its integration with XSN.

If you're reading this review shortly after purchasing *Drive*, fret not. You'll have fun, and—dig it!—there are dunks aplenty. But understand the reality: Better games exist.

Jeff Pearlman

Five out of Ten

NFL BLITZ PRO

Dev: Midway Sports Pub: Midway Players: 1-4 Pro: Test! Origin: Chicago, IL Online: No

For years, if gridiron fanatics wanted straightaway arcade football without the strategy and simulation excess of *Madden* or Sega's *2K* series, they turned to Midway's popular *NFL Blitz* series—it had just the right mix of button-tapping frenzy and adrenaline-fueled football action. But this year's iteration has altered the formula, going with an 11-on-11 gameplay format and tacking on a franchise mode for the first time. The results are mixed; *NFL Blitz Pro* ain't a Super Bowl contender, but it could probably sneak into the playoffs as a wild card.

Pro can't make up its mind as to what it wants to be—fantastical fun or straightforward pigskin action. It doesn't really succeed at being a traditional, over-the-top *Blitz* game, what with its commitment to a running game and 10-yard first downs (as opposed to the classic 30-yarders), but it also can't compete with *Madden* as a pure football simulation. The game loses points for confusing play-call menus, weak player models, and wonky A.I. that tends to emphasize the wrong offenses and defenses at the wrong times.

You could not rightly call any 365-day period a year if Midway didn't release a *Blitz* game in it.

That said, *Pro*'s franchise mode is fairly successful, the cheeky in-game commentary is amusing, and the unlockable content is worthwhile (especially the additional game modes, including the throwback Blitz classic). *Pro* emerges as relatively fun, if not very deep. The new formula succeeds partially, but football maniacs are advised to look elsewhere for a more satisfying gridiron experience.

Dan DiGiacomo

Seven out of Ten

FREESTYLE STREET SOCCER

Dev: Silicon Dreams Pub: Acclaim Players: 1-4 Foot: Fungus Origin: England Online: No

Freestyle Street Soccer aspires to be the soccer equivalent of the exaggerated, hyperbolic *NBA Street*, albeit with a British accent. It succeeds, instead, in becoming *Street* with a British accent and no other redeeming qualities. Like another attempt at arcade-styled footy, Midway's *Red Card Soccer 20-03*, it strips away all the complexity and structure of the game and forgets to replace it with anything worthwhile.

Playing through the game's training mode might fool you into thinking there's some depth here, especially during the bit where it introduces the different pass types, the freestyle combo system, and the flashy one-timer pass-shot combinations. That illusion lasts until you realize the CPU A.I. is so boneheaded, especially in the defense and goalie department, that you can win a match simply by rushing the net and shooting head-on.

You'll beat the keeper at least half the time, and because the pitches are too big for the abbreviated teams (four per side, including goalies), the CPU can't play any kind of structured defense. Human players, of course, don't need to play structured defense; because penalties are nonexistent, you can tackle the other team's forwards and swipe the ball with impunity.

Dumb Soccer Idea #1, meet Dumb Soccer Idea #2.

At this point, the realization that the game looks like crap is essentially an afterthought. The damage has already been done. This would pass as a minigame mode in *FIFA* or *Winning Eleven*, but no way is it ready to stand on its own.

Dave Smith

Two out of Ten

ULTIMATE BEACH SOCCER

Dev: PAM Development Pub: DreamCatcher Players: 1-4 Beached: Whale Origin: France Online: No

DreamCatcher would have you believe that substandard graphics, annoying music, horrible control, and jerky execution translates, anywhere on Earth or in outer space, as "ultimate." Considering *Ultimate Beach Soccer* is the only beach soccer title for Xbox, one begins to wonder where the company found the nerve to release a game that plays as if it were coded by the ultimate beach personality, Jeff Spiccoli.

The players, modeled after real-life beach soccer professionals, sport very little detail and would've been fancy in the 16-bit era. Animations on the field and off are stiff, jerky, and simply not compelling.

There are five game modes in total, and those wishing to alienate three of their friends can stagger into a four-player co-op mode or tournament. The controls are clumsy and barely responsive, and there's little payoff for those who learn advanced moves. For a game claiming to hold "pick up and play" controllability, there is a very high degree of frustration involved with tasks such as keeping your controlled character in sight. Also, *Soccer* inexplicably freezes before loading each sequence or cut-scene, which comes off as cheap and unprofessional.

Dumb Soccer Idea #2, meet Dumb Soccer Idea #1.

Sounds are limited to seagulls, food-vendor chatter, low-grade hip-hop and commentators whose delivery sounds as if they don't know English and were speaking their lines phonetically. If soccer is your thing, stick to the *FIFA* series and avoid this title as if it were contagious.

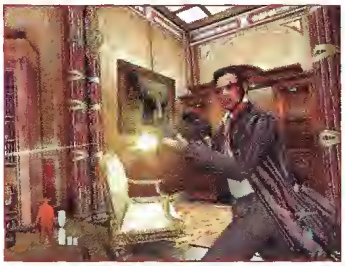
Russell Garbutt

Three out of Ten

MAX PAYNE 2: THE FALL OF MAX PAYNE

The metaphor was a sledgehammer used to drive home the headline

Dev: Remedy
Pub: Rockstar Games
Players: 1
Melodramatic: Max
Origin: Finland
Online: No



■ Former debate club champion Max Payne explains why capital punishment for fashion criminals is a fine idea.

The sun does not set on ne'er-do-well cop Max Payne as much as it slams on him. The perpetual rainstorm of his life is cold and hard like the heart of a woman plucked from her chest and stuck in a freezer. His second adventure, *Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne* stands as a sort of love story gone horribly awry, with the gritty antihero falling victim to the sweet siren song of assassin Mona Sax and then plunging deep into the underbelly of New York's criminal circuit.

Overwrought melodrama and third-person-perspective gunplay make for an excellent mix, as the brooding Payne carves out a rough justice. As was the case with the first game, comic book style cut-scenes move the game's plot forward with all the subtlety and grace of a chainsaw wart removal.

Gone are the fairly ridiculous dream sequences wherein Payne as the biblical Job with a gun and bad attitude relives the murder of his wife by precariously tottering across a series of thin blood trails leading to either death or salvation. In their place are a series of fairly ridiculous dream sequences set in a police office and a hospital, with the cop replaying his greatest hits while the screen warps and blurs like a drunkard's slideshow. In *Payne*, these scenes, though superfluous—they only serve to further hammer home the notion of the protagonist's nightmarish existence—are at least quickly dismissed as fluff.

■ Max Payne can leap and dive acrobatically to avoid getting hit. When he does take gunfire, he can recover health by swallowing painkillers. This game is so true to life, it hurts.

Overwrought melodrama and third-person-perspective gunplay make for an excellent mix

The improvements here are small, but genuinely functional. Now, players can map thrown weapons such as grenades or Molotov cocktails to the Xbox controller's Y button. This allows Payne to spray a room with leaden death and scorch it with combustibles without having to swap out one weapon for another. The game's "bullet-time" feature, used to slow enemies to allow for dramatic, cinema-style leaps and dives, has been bolstered with the addition of a bullet time within the bullet time. Simply, it's more of the same, but rewards players for racking up multiple kills in slow-motion with extra seconds of time-distortion.

As for the rest, it's adrenaline and testosterone served with bullet trails, rag-dolling bodies that bend and contort realistically when kissed with lead, and enough mood to choke William Faulkner in his grave. This angry man's love story, at its apex, sees Sax with a sniper rifle, looming over Payne, defending him while he attempts to free himself. Here, it's Payne who's vulnerable and if love is to conquer all, Sax must be the one to see it to its logical conclusion.

Said conclusion, sadly, comes far too quickly. In Payne's terms, it's like the last kiss from an angry lover before she pulls the pin and brings the world to boil. (Say maybe six to eight hours in real time.)

Greg Orlando

Nine out of Ten

You Have the Right...

Goofy gangster Vincent Gognitti, in one of *Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne*'s lighthearted moments, gets himself stuck into a goofy and booby-trapped mascot's costume. As Payne, players must escort this minor scum to safety, all the while serving up a light snack of death and mayhem. Particularly amusing are Gognitti's frightened pleas served up with a New Yawk accent.

■ Sure it looks cool, but you wouldn't believe how many times Max shot his feet off while using bullet time. Thank heaven for Blue Cross and a generous NY Police Department sick-leave policy.

HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE

Dev: EA Games Pub: EA Players: 1 Stone: Trippin' Origin: England Online: No

The mere existence of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* might baffle even the most ardent Potter fans. Why would Electronic Arts release a game based on the first *Harry Potter* film/book a year after one based on the second? Well, it's simple, really—the next film won't hit until June, and EA failed to deliver next-gen *Stone* games back when it was timely...so, why not shake a few extra Gold Galleons and Silver Knuts out of kiddies' pockets in the erstwhile with a quick cash-in?

Yep, this is basically a rehash of last year's *Chamber of Secrets* game for PlayStation, with similar visuals, controls, and combat. That's not necessarily a bad thing, though. The visuals here, as with those in *Chamber*, skillfully re-create the magical world of Hogwarts with detailed textures and subtle lighting. Likewise, the unobtrusive soundtrack and excellent sound-alike actors provide a solid soundscape. The *Legend of Zelda*-derived gameplay provides the real draw, though. Adventure veterans won't find the combat or puzzles overly taxing, but luckily, it's enjoyable enough to keep you playing until the end.

■ Before Poochie the rockin' dog was the original hound from hell, there wes Cerebus/Fluffy.

Most players will reach that ending fairly quickly, however. Since the source material relies pretty heavily on exposition, deriving action-oriented gameplay from it isn't easy. And EA unwisely decides to skip nearly all of the characterization and backstory here—often, large sections of the book are glossed over, so unless you've read it or seen the movie, the scant narrative here will quickly leave you behind.

Shane Bettenhausen

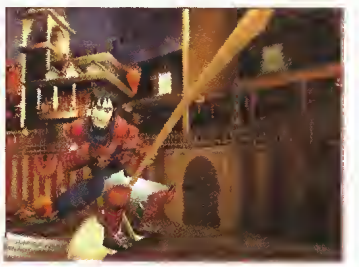
Six out of Ten

HARRY POTTER QUIDDITCH WORLD CUP

Dev: EA Pub: EA Players: 1-2 Quaffle: Waffle Origin: England Online: No

The whole of Quidditch—J.K. Rowling's odd fusion of soccer, basketball, and sorcery—can be summarized with a handful of *Harry Potter* book chapters and movie scenes. Electronic Arts has not only managed to expand the Quidditch minigame into a full title, but has also captured the spirit of the fictional sport.

Harry Potter Quidditch World Cup uses Hogwarts Academy and its established teams for its tutorial: Win some very easy challenges teaching you how to use the bludger, quaffle, seeker, and special moves, then play some easy matches, and finally win the Hogwarts Cup. Once you enter the actual World Cup, complete with unique teams and stadiums, the game gets significantly harder. While you might write off Quidditch as fantastical child's play, the World Cup itself requires hardcore skill and mastery of all of those special moves, dodges, and bludger launches you may blithely ignore in the Hogwarts portion matter in World Cup matches. The A.I. for the World Cup teams is devious at intercepting, passing, and goal keeping.



■ Young Master Harry Potter rides his wooden phallus to greatness. And now, it's shower time!

It's wholly competent, but you'll notice that you can't switch team members, and you can't alter your player's altitude. You're automatically set to control the closest player, and the game decides how high you fly. With some of the control removed from your hands, so goes some of the fun.

Drink of the *Cup*; it's surprisingly solid, proving definitively that it's possible to take a fictional sport and bring it to digital life. Potent sorcery indeed.

Thierry Nguyen

Seven out of Ten

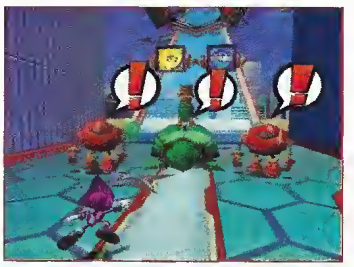
SONIC HEROES

Dev: Sonic Team Pub: Sega Players: 1-2 Heroes: We Could Be! Origin: Japan Online: No

Sega's ubiquitous mascot needed a career-saving turnaround. His last major console outing, *Sonic Adventure 2*, alienated fans with copious amounts of tedious crystal excavation, leisurely hovering, and all-around gameplay sluggishness. Nearly every review (be it critical or from li'l Jimmy the consumer) boiled down to "Let me run!"

Thankfully, Sonic's handlers listened. In classic Sonic fashion, *Sonic Heroes* looks spectacular, with dazzling day-glo colors, ultrasmooth movement, and trippy effects. Every stage explodes with breakneck speed, insane loops, absurd corkscrews, and other gravity-defying razmatazz.

Heroes offers a return to classic Sonic form. Of course, simply running forward ad nauseam gets old, so that's where the whole "heroes" concept comes in. You control a team of three characters: one speedster, one powerhouse, and an annoying, flying, chirpy one. A simple button press switches between the three, the clever level designs guarantee you'll have to break a few walls and soar over pits in order to succeed, and multiple paths wind through each gargantuan stage.



■ The triple EXXXclamation brothers can be defeeted by seying seven potent curse words.

Heroes is a surprisingly long game, but doesn't offer enough incentive for players to complete it with all four character teams as the levels don't change, and the teams are largely indistinguishable. Aside from the difficulty levels, the Sonic, Dark, and Rose teams' games are identical. Luckily, the Chaotix team offers something new—diverse (and goofy) missions set in the same stages the other teams scamper through.

Shane Bettenhausen

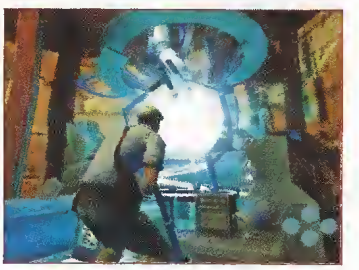
Eight out of Ten

BROKEN SWORD: THE SLEEPING DRAGON

Dev: Revolution Pub: The Adventure Company Players: 1 Broke?: Don't Fix Origin: England Online: No

The original *Broken Sword* contained one of the finest stories ever told through the illiterate medium of videogames. Many years on from the series' seminal debut, developer Revolution is back in the armchair, reading from its new opus, *Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon*. George and Nico (from *Broken Swords* 1 and 2) return to the scene for their most far-fetched quest to date.

The course of this adventure takes players through Africa and Europe. Things progress at a set rate as puzzles are cleared and new objectives arise. Yes, it's hackneyed. *Dragon* is not revolutionary. Most players will have played titles similar to this. But still, Revolution's game is a distinguished one; everything in *Dragon* is drawn realistically, yet the game's palette effects a stylish twist—this is a world of moody hues. Too, the script—the most important feature in a game such as this—is particularly well done: Clichés rarely appear and each character speaks in an individual manner. In book form, the plot wouldn't win any prizes, but in the context of videogame stories, it is a veritable *Don Quixote* in that it weaves together humor, drama, and romance.



■ We secretly replaced George's coffee machine with an atom smasher. Let's see if he notices.

Dragon's transition from 2D to 3D has been made seamlessly. The game may not look like part of the *Sword* canon at first glance, but the strength of its twisting, intriguing plot marks it as such. A good story told well is a rare thing, but for the third time, Revolution has done just that. Players looking for an intelligent adventure will find few better Xbox titles than this.

Jonti Davies

Eight out of Ten

THE SIMS: BUSTIN' OUT

A so-called life worth living

Dev: Maxis
Pub: Electronic Arts
Players: 1-2
Sims: Ulated
Origin: Walnut Creek, CA
Online: No

■ Nothing says safety like tampering with a gigantic Tesla coil while standing around a series of open toxic waste barrels.

God bless the maid. There's urine on the floor and the stains in the bathtub seem to be hatching an evil plot. But there's love blossoming in the hot tub, the killer plant just ate a would-be burglar, and the videogames are being enjoyed by all. Elsewhere in Sim City, there are mad parties to throw, ghosts to exorcise, hated enemies to have arrested. Life, Sims style, is sweeter than ambrosia sandwiched between McDonald's syrupy McGriddles buns and topped with a Pixie Stix.

An odd bird, *The Sims: Bustin' Out* returns little computer people to Xbox in a console-exclusive adventure featuring no shooting, no platforming, and no brawling save for a genuinely comical sissy slap fight. Instead, it's a sort-of life simulator that's as deep as it is wide, perfectly tuned to Xbox's controller, and the type of video crack that's best ingested in heart-choking overdoses.

As a simulated human, players must first bust free of mom's house, and then carve out a life. At all times, a Sim must have basic needs such as hunger, fun, social interaction, bladder function, etc. attended to, while trying to improve his standing by gaining skills, earning job promotions, fulfilling in-game goals, and making friends. It's an uphill climb; with only 24 simulated hours in a day, no weekends, and something as simple as urination taking 20 or so minutes to complete, time is definitely precious.

■ Shortly after this picture was taken, a giant ape snatched this Sim's true love away, forcing him to settle for the guy in the pool. It's a hard, hard world.

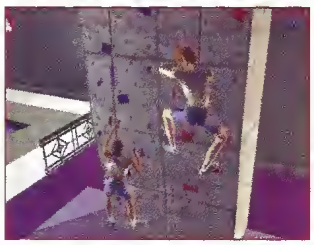
With each day presenting **a new opportunity to fly or fall face down,** *Bustin' Out* never loses its luster

Progress in the game results in lots of unlockable items, new social interactions such as the delicious "pull my finger" gambit and the rather goofy "show muscles," and additional quests to perform. As a Sim's status improves, he can drive ever-sweeter cars, interact with his fellow Simulants in more detailed ways, and explore previously hidden locales. Progress is oftentimes impeded, but never outright blocked; the developers do a great job of blending tough challenges with easy ones, and when players find their career path hindered, it's easy to switch jobs, move to a new area, and tackle a different set of problems. There's always a tangible sense of accomplishment, and the more players put into this game, the more it opens up and gives back.

Finding a way to make a day work provides serious, meaningful challenges. A life of labor bears sour fruit, and leisurely pursuits don't bring home the bacon. There are bills to pay, friendships to maintain, and strange and wondrous devices such as the incubator (which births strange, flesh-eating plants) to manipulate. The bathroom won't use itself. With each day presenting a new opportunity to fly or fall face down, *Bustin' Out* never loses its luster.

Greg Orlando

Stop, Collaborate, Listen



The Sims: Bustin' Out features cooperative play in all game modes, meaning two players can collaborate with each other to rise to the top of the food chain. Even better, players can compete against one another, fighting for the hot (simulated) girlfriend, racing to see who can get the most phat of cars, or just plotting each other's (hopefully) grisly demise.

■ The life of Dudley Landgrab, treiler-park messiah, has greatly benefitted from the addition of an air-hockey table. Note the cute doggies on the table's sides.

Nine out of Ten

DEUS EX: INVISIBLE WAR

The ancient art of delightful gameplay

Dev: Ion Storm
Pub: Eidos
Players: 1
Ghost: In the Machine
Origin: Austin, TX
Online: No

■ *Deus Ex: Invisible War* is powered by the Havoc physics engine. Havoc will be employed in the upcoming *Half-Life 2*.

In a time before *Grand Theft Auto III*, *Deus Ex: The Conspiracy* offered players a game full of unprecedented freedom. Those who fancied themselves stealthy hacker-types could go through the game like a pacifist, while traditional shooter fans could bust through doors with guns blazing. Adhering to the same ambitious school of game design is the technologically savvy sequel, *Deus Ex: Invisible War*. Set 20 years after The Collapse, a societal and power structure breakdown caused at the end of the first game, the first-person adventure *War* tells a post-apocalyptic tale of disparities.

At the heart of this pseudopolitical maelstrom is you. You assume the persona of Alex D., a free agent in a figurative invisible war between powerful factions vying for control.

If *War* sounds ambitious, that's because it is. Not only are you given the opportunity to define your character through choices and dialogue, the game is also backed by one of the most sophisticated physics systems ever.

As a cybernetic warrior, D's arms, legs, and eyes can be upgraded to superhuman levels, directly affecting your strategies in the field. There's a fair amount of customization to be had, and after the first few hours, it soon becomes clear what playing style suits you best. Like a super agent in *The Matrix*, taking down normal folk is a visceral rush for the ego—and in many ways, the most satisfying aspect of *War*.

■ Shoot the barrels and they'll leak poisonous gases in much the same way you can poke an *Xbox Nation* editor after a particularly spicy meal at Henry's Hunan and produce noxious fumes.

As an Xbox console exclusive, *Deus Ex: Invisible War* is also **gorgeous to behold.**

Just as the game succeeds on so many levels by delivering gameplay possibilities, its promised freedom of choice and player action entangles *War*. Never mind the occasions when you can slaughter every man, woman, and child in a certain part of the city with absolutely zero consequences. There is a pivotal instance where you need to choose between obtaining a weapon or killing a scientist. The game is designed so that one choice eliminates the other. Given the scenario, as well as the motivation to actually complete both tasks—to play one side against another, as it were—you'll find that not only can you use the game's liberal design philosophy to outsmart it, but that in doing so the illusion of freedom is shattered.

Despite its lofty goals and failed attempts at true gameplay freedom, *War* is a fantastic adventure, simply because its story forces you to think, in a sci-fi context, about its real-life equivalents. As an Xbox console exclusive, the game is also gorgeous to behold, boasting dynamic lights, shadows, and interactive environments, making it relatively easy to suspend disbelief. To paraphrase the Architect in *The Matrix Reloaded*, however, choice is but an illusion—and *War* is ultimately a predestined experience, albeit a worthwhile one.

Che Chou

■ The special limbo biomodification allows Alex D. to gracefully glide under those pesky laser barriers and avoid those icky incinerator burns.

Fun with Rag Dolls

Deus Ex: Invisible War features a skeletal system for its digital populace called "rag doll" technology, allowing dead or unconscious bodies to slump as a body theoretically could, if every one of its bones were shattered into pieces. Given that this feature is incredibly cool and also incredibly silly, critics have dubbed *War* the best body-throwing simulator ever.

Eight out of Ten

TONY HAWK'S UNDERGROUND

And underperforming, perhaps?

Dev: Neversoft
Pub: Activision
Players: 1
T.H.U.G: Life
Origin: Los Angeles, CA
Online: No

■ Despite several amusing moments, *Underground*'s overall narrative feels forced, awkward, and generally inconsequential.

Not unlike nog and stories of urine-soaked, drunken Santas fornicating on the front lawn, each holiday season seems to bring forth a new pseudo-reinvention of the *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* franchise. This year's hook is the ability to dismount from one's skateboard in order to traverse the game's series of familiar levels and challenges. The inspiration for this modification is developer Neversoft's emphasis on an extended, coherent storyline; in theory, the option to run around on foot opens up an adventure element that is incongruent with the prior games' "man on a skateboard" ethos.

Sadly, both of these modernizations—the on-foot play mechanic as well as the expanded story mode—stand as the game's weakest elements. Running around feels stodgy and unresponsive, more reminiscent of the original *Tomb Raider* than, say, *Price of Persia: The Sands of Time*. The theory of a true *Pro Skater* adventure is a good one. But instead of a tightly knit story in which a skateboard appreciably aids one's progression, the result is a skateboarding game with a generally hollow narrative rationale tagged onto every level goal—from pulling off a series of tricks to impress the pros and gain streed cred, to collecting a series of board parts strewn across rooftops. It's all done well and taps into skateboarding celebrity culture, but also comes across as more of a novelty than a compelling story line.

■ Although few and far between, there are certainly some memorable moments in *Underground*'s mundane story mode. They're just too few and too far between to really make it worth the while.

The on-foot play mechanic and the expanded story mode stand as the game's weakest elements

While the create-a-skater mode provides momentary distraction, the lack of online options greatly devalues the overall experience. The notion of "playing as yourself"—facilitated in the PlayStation 2 version by the ability to upload digital pictures of yourself to a Neversoft server, have them sent back to your console and then mapped onto the face of your created character—is entirely absent on Xbox. Even more conspicuous is the missing online gameplay; the prospect of entering a skatepark filled with digital recreations of your 10 closest friends, sharing tricks and talking shit is exactly what Xbox Live was built for, and yet nonexistent in *Underground* due to Sony's exclusivity. It's not an issue of Evil Sony using dollars to outmaneuver Virtuous Microsoft, certainly, but rather an issue of quality control; as it stands, online-free *Underground* simply feels like an incomplete interpretation of the real thing.

Despite the criticisms, however, not all is lost. *Underground* once again reaffirms Neversoft's uncanny ability to craft enormous, hopelessly addictive skateboarding videogames, and those looking for a series of habit-forming challenges need look no further. It's a solid effort from start to finish, certainly, but far from the genre-bending *Pro Skater* masterpiece the series so deserves.

Evan Shamoon

Seven out of Ten

■ Pedestrians watched helplessly from below as Rory decided to set the Guinness record for "Most Points in a Suicide."

A Word From Our Sponsor

One of the consistent torch bearers for videogames' suddenly budding relationship with pop culture, this year's version of *Tony Hawk* includes another impressively varied soundtrack, ranging from Quasimoto to KISS to Dan the Automator. Not surprisingly, some less street-credible sponsors have also entered the mix. McUnderground, anyone?

MIDWAY ARCADE TREASURES

Dev: Midway Pub: Midway Players: 1-4 Quarter: Up Origin: Chicago, IL Online: No

Midway knew how to make 'em. From the manic *Robotron*-meets-*Running Man* intensity of *Smash TV*, to *Rampart*'s breakneck battles, to *Gauntlet*'s pre-*Diablo* dungeon crawling, the rules were simple: Kicking your ass kept the quarters coming, and victory always seemed only a coin away.

With today's save-anytime, fat health bar standards, this dated philosophy might take some getting reacclimated to, as getting whacked by a single bullet on a screen brimming with crossfire can be a humbling experience (think of yourself as *South Park*'s Kenny, and you'll do just fine). But for the nimble fingered and nostalgic, the unpretentious emphasis on pure gameplay characteristic of titles such as *Paperboy*, *Marble Madness*, and *Root Beer Tapper*, also packs an undeniable charm.

As is always the case with these collections, some of the "treasures" are suspect and will have seemed better back when you had to stand on a crate to reach the controls. Most, however, are legitimately entertaining even today. The grainy PlayStation-quality

■ This is a screenshot for an old game. We think it's called *Attack of the Enemies*.

developer interviews, trivia, and galleries culled from old Midway anthologies, on the other hand, aren't. High Score Live, which posts scores online, pits players against punks across the planet, is the best bonus by far. True, the chance to challenge cross-country friends to a round of *Rampage* would've gilded this almost-golden trek down memory lane, but who's counting karats on a game that sells for a scant 20 bucks?

Shawn Elliott

Seven out of Ten

SPYHUNTER 2

Dev: Angel Studios Pub: Midway Players: 1-2 I Spy: With My Little Eye Origin: Carlsbad, CA Online: No

You're not going to find many people rallying behind remakes of arcade classics and defending them as examples of top-notch videogame creation. After all, most of the appeal of these classics is their simple, addictive gameplay. When companies "update" the gameplay to appeal to modern gamers, the result is often an awkward mix of old and new sensibilities.

The 2001 console update of the 1983 arcade car-combat game, *Spy Hunter* (named, confusingly enough, *SpyHunter*), didn't suffer from this problem, thanks in no small part to the fact that the game's basic tenets (drive and shoot) are still common gameplay staples. Just shift the viewpoint from above the car to behind it, and you're good to go.

SpyHunter 2 carries on that proud tradition by offering more of the same. The 3D game features mission-based levels, a transforming car, and a variety of offensive and defensive gizmos, many taken straight from the old arcade game (oil slicks, smokescreens, etc.). Despite a few obligatory new features such as a dull off-road car mode

■ That kitten, we gladly report, will never menace anyone again.

(ooh—the tires inflate!), *Hunter 2* feels less like a sequel and more like an add-on disc. That's not to say that the game isn't any fun—it still has plenty of exciting (and challenging) missions and smooth control. The problem is, the more you play, the more the feeling of repetition sets in. You'll also begin to notice smaller irritations (why is it so difficult to get missiles to lock on to your desired target?) potholing this high road to adventure.

Phil Theobald

Six out of Ten

I-NINJA

Dev: Argonaut Pub: Namco Players: 1 I-am: Ninja I Am Origin: England Online: No

If Tecmo's stylish, quicksilver-shiny adventure *Ninja Gaiden* stands as the Brad Pitt of assassin epics, then *I-Ninja* must undeniably be the genre's Chris Farley or, at bare minimum, its Millard Fillmore. Cute but bloated, *Ninja* throws up a protagonist in the shrunken swordfighter Ninja, dropping him into a platforming adventure with as many personalities as a schizophrenics' jamboree.

Ninja's great strength and, simultaneously, its Achilles' heel rests in its diversity of play. The rage-filled Ninja takes control of a giant robot for a *Punch Out*-style dukearoo, mans a cannon to plunk boats and skyships in first-person brawls in three-dimensional battles á la the lame arcade fighter *Psychic Force*, and all but does a soft-shoe interpretive dance with the Rockettes. Yet with great variation comes great dreck, as developer Argonaut simply tosses everything it can at the wall to see what sticks—and only about half does. Players will delight in trying to outrace a lit fuse, just as they will delight, in equal measure, in turning off the game in abject

■ Our diminutive hero has a little rage problem and, early on, inadvertently kills his sensei.

frustration after being asked to maneuver Ninja and whatever junk he's riding across a series of narrow platforms for the eighth time.

Unbridled rage, piss and vinegar, diminutive features, and cool quips ("The steel is cold, yes!") add up to make Ninja a genuinely likable figure starring in a game that's not as good as it should be, nor as bad as one might fear. And that may well be the unkindest ninja sword cut of all.

Greg Orlando

Six out of Ten

SPAWN: ARMAGEDDON

Dev: Point of View Pub: Namco Players: 1 Cy-Gor: Here's the Door! Origin: Tustin, CA Online: No

Comic book antihero Spawn laughs maniacally after using his mystical chains to tear a foe apart, but inside, he's weeping in the manner of a baby with skin like a delicious, flame-broiled Whopper™. He's starring in the apocalyptic brawler *Spawn: Armageddon*, and it won't take an archaeologist to discern this third-person adventure is a video coprolite.

Spawn has the luck of a run-over Irishman. He's been the focus of a bad PlayStation adventure, a terrible Super Nintendo beat-em-up, and a dreadful Dreamcast shooter. *Armageddon* continues the trend of unrepentant awfulness, blending craptacular fighting with stinktastic platforming, and tossing on a bunch of badly designed monsters (such as a killer bulldozer or the cybernetic gorilla deliciously named Cy-Gor), all of whom apparently come from the sketchpad of a 7th-grade Slayer fan.

Expect such high intensity comic book moments such as the time where Spawn throws down with a series of Flying Imps and Berserkers and a gray brick wall blocks the action from the

■ Todd McFarlane's Spawn only hurts because he loves. (To hurt.)

player's view. Thrill to endless switches and boxes that want chopping so Spawn can gain access to a new area. Boldly go into new areas that will immediately be cordoned off by force fields until Spawn can destroy a predetermined number of foes. Finally, struggle mightily against a camera that hates players not only in the game, but in life as well. On the judgment day, one hopes *Armageddon* will be resistant to hell's searing flames.

Greg Orlando

Three out of Ten

NFL STREET

Dev: EA Big
Pub: EA
Players: 1-2
Foot: Brawl
Origin: Canada
Online: No

■ Johnny "White and Red Shoes" Johnson high-stepped his way into our hearts and also in front of a moving bus. Alas.

The redheaded stepchild of an And1 mix tape (check it out!) and Goldie Hawn's *Wildcats* takes the field in the form of EA Big's newest *Street* title. The latest creation from EA's northern arm applies *NBA Street*'s hit-making formula to football, rife with enough sass, fancy footwork, and trash talk to fill the post-Super Bowl void.

Street's stripped-down, 7-on-7 helmet-free action is based around improvisation and, more importantly style; the flashier and more audacious your play—think Terrell Owens—the faster your Gamebreaker meter fills. Once fully charged, it transforms your team into an unstoppable scoring machine or an impenetrable iron wall. Anyone can throw a pass; the idea here is to throw a no-look one, catch it with one hand, pitch it just before you take a hit from the safety, and take it to the end zone while highsteppin' the whole time. There are no kickers here, either. You take it in for one on the ground or two in the air.

At times, *Street* seems to be the extreme-sports equivalent of a dungeon crawler; you're charged with enduring countless hours of repetitive and predictable play, battling it out with a superhumanly tough A.I. in order to build a team of all-stars or steal talent from the opposition.

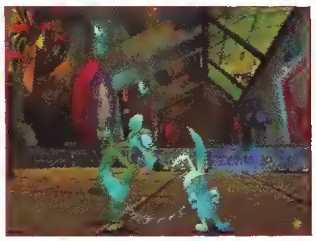
Street's sore spot, the lack of online play, only sours what may have been the sweetest aspect of this game. Despite questions about its pacing and multiplayer options, *Street* will still keep the controller in your hands for hours.

David Ziganay

Seven out of Ten

WHIPLASH

Dev: Crystal Dynamics
Pub: Eidos Interactive
Players: 1
Chain: Gang
Origin: Menlo Park, CA
Online: No



■ "Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall down an open manhole cover and die."—Mel Brooks

"Reap the whirlwind, Genron! Reap it!" chatty rabbit and part-time projectile Redmond howls during the chaotic hootenanny *Whiplash*. Redmond and chain-gang pal Spanx the weasel rage against the machine and the man who made it, smashing stuff, breaking things, and wrecking junk—amen and hallelujah. *Whiplash* drives home the message like a fist wrapped around a roll of quarters: The man sucks, and whatever power this tin-pot dictator wields must be brought crashing down around him.

Evil conglomerate Genron pushes the Fattress, a mattress for porkers, and shoots hamsters out of a cannon. At first, Spanx and Redmond are called upon to free the animal inmates in Genron's asylum, but as *Whiplash* progresses, the platformer becomes more and more like an alcoholic's delirium tremens, its cavernous rooms holding huge air vents, giant funny animal-eating chasms, and machinery with no discernable purpose.

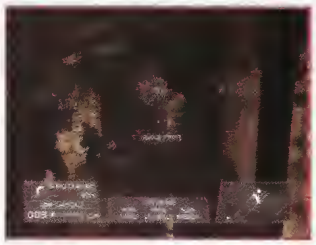
Weird and wonderful, *Whiplash* pushes rebellion to the point where it seems callously unconcerned that its middle finger sometimes is aimed straight at its audience. A shaky camera and some serious graphic glitching mar the violent fantasy, and the game unflinchingly drops players into huge rooms with no hint as to how they're to be traversed. Worse, it gives them a fully functional 3D map that excels in being indecipherable. Bite me, *Whiplash* says, and, ultimately, it tastes nothing like chicken.

Greg Orlando

Seven out of Ten

TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX 3

Beating *Counter-Strike* at its own most dangerous game



■ Executing the "Go French" command caused Ding and his covert operation team to drop their guns and run screaming.

Tom Clancy loves Xbox, and with good reason. While his books may never reach some of America's unwashed youth, there are military shooters brandishing his name, running amok online for Microsoft's big black box—and the kids are eating it up. Now, thanks to Ubisoft's latest and greatest *Rainbow Six*, Clancy's about to have his name permanently tattooed on the minds of Xbox Live addicts everywhere.

Originally released on the PC under the subtitle *Raven Shield*, *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3* for Xbox is an original, built-from-the-ground-up tactical shooter living and dying by Microsoft's mandate that all great games are played together. And in the spirit of that togetherness, *Six 3* succeeds by being *the* best online shooter in 2003.

Like other *Rainbow Six* titles, this game is an orgy of gadget and military worship without much of a story. As you'd expect, plot and characterization take a back seat to the real task at hand: perforating terrorists with the best firearms money can buy. And in *Six 3*, cash flow is never problematic.

The game achieves excellence through realism, feel, and transparent user interface. By using the *Splinter Cell* graphics engine, Ubisoft's Montreal team was able to create 14 convincing hotspots. Though it's easy enough to spot graphical seams, everything looks effortless and natural. Night sorties and areas with low light exude endless ambience and wild, elongated shadows serve as both visual frosting and strategic warnings of enemies to come. And then there are the weapons themselves, which look arguably better than those in any first-person shooter to date.

But visual cues take you only halfway there. What elevates *Six 3* to *Halo*-esque quality is the way the game feels and controls—particularly the tactile controller feedback you get by pulling the trigger. The nasty kick of a burst from an AK-47 is easily distinguished from the short stutter of an MP5 submachine gun. Combine the intangible feel of the firearms with perfect first-person shooter controls and it simply feels good to pop off your guns.

Don't expect nonplayer characters to take the punishment without putting up a fight, however. Friendly A.I. have the professional sense to always use environments for cover, as well as the acuity to constantly watch your six. Once you've mastered control of your squad, the game even takes on shades of real-time strategy, except this time you're duking it out from the vantage point of a grunt.

While the single-player action is enough to occupy any tactical diehard for days, it's *Six 3*'s Xbox Live support that will keep you coming back for more. Lots and lots more. Team deathmatch is, as you'd expect, intense and competitive, but occasionally lacks weapons balance. But it is incredibly addictive, and a defining online experience not to be missed.

With *Counter-Strike* as its only real competition on Xbox for the time being, *Six 3* stands virtually alone in its comprehensive detail and polish. You can forget about ever going back to *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon*. This game is definitely where the shooting is.

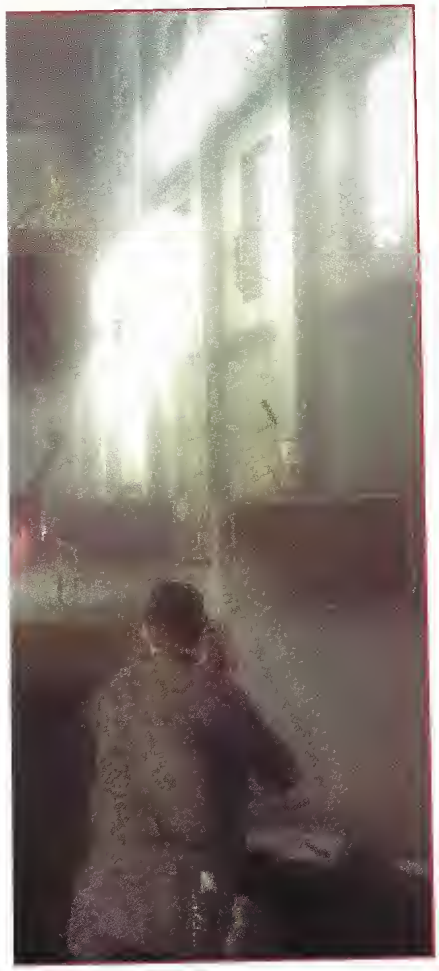
Che Chou

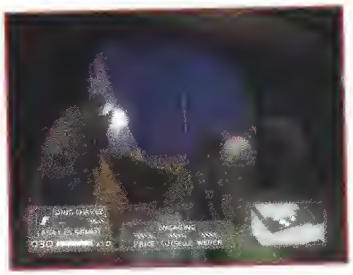
■ It doesn't take a military genius to know that fighting without the benefit of cover is sort of like the honeymoon after marrying a high-voltage transformer.

The game **achieves excellence through realism,** feel, and transparent user interface

Nine out of Ten

Dev: Ubisoft Montreal
Pub: Ubisoft
Players: 1-16
Check: Your Six
Origin: Canada
Online: Yes





■ After eating 15 bean burritos, the world took on an entirely new perspective for hardened warrior and squad leader Ding Chavez.

On the Download

Multiplayer on Xbox Live happens over *Rainbow Six 3*'s special deathmatch maps. Each arena is carefully constructed to facilitate a perfectly balanced ratio of cerebral strategizing and all-out bloody violence. The game also supports downloadable levels (two have been released to date) to prolong your stay in S.W.A.T. land.

MAXIMUM CHASE

Dev: Genki Pub: Majesco Players: 1 Chase: The Ace Origin: Japan Online: No

There can be no denying Genki's *Maximum Chase* does not want for motorcoach-based chases. At no time is the player, in some slick chariot, not being pursued by cars, trucks, armored vehicles, helicopters, what-have-you.

What the game lacks, noticeably so, is an acceptable amount of maximosity. Gameplay comes tightly regimented, with players alternately driving their cars in an attempt to destroy their foes while reaching a predetermined safety zone and then relinquishing control of the wheel in order to shoot enemies. With play doled out so rigidly, the chases don't feel quite real or very dangerous at all. Instead, there's a sense that this is all some poorly done action film following a half-assed script.

A detailed and pretty Los Angeles serves as *Chase*'s playground. Each player-controlled vehicle handles more or less the same, but the scenery whips by in a blur and Genki does a wonderful job of imparting a manic sense of speed to the proceedings. If the enemy cars are all-too-easily guided into concrete dividers or explosive barrels (which, oddly enough, are left lying around everywhere), at least things move briskly.

■ Cars and maximosity are combined to create the most furious game since *Furious Karting*.

An excellent series of replays fusing together a series of wild cuts and pans, and shown when a stage has been completed, serves to show players the type of freewheeling, far-flung, and over-the-top driving game *Chase* could have been. It's not a good sign when a game's replay mode outdoes its interactive sequences, and the maximum this *Chase* will net is a five of 10.

Greg Orlando

Five out of Ten

R: RACING EVOLUTION

Dev: Namco Pub: Namco Players: 1-2 R: Hype Origin: Japan Online: No

Serving as a misshapen foil to the excellent *Project Gotham Racing 2* is *R: Racing Evolution*, Namco's latest entry into its revered *Ridge Racer* series. Now, as *Evolution* peels out onto Xbox, it seems Namco has lost all sense of its roots. To put it bluntly, this is a racing game with a major identity crisis.

The developer's first mistake was to take on *Gran Turismo* in the simulation arena. Unless you're going to have the cojones to innovate the genre or the resources to out-blanket *Turismo*'s gargantuan roster of real-life autos, there's little point in challenging the king.

Featuring a handful of familiar cars, in a handful of familiar real-life courses, *Evolution* combines realistic racing techniques with arcade-like physics for an experience that's colorless and frustratingly compromised. You can't powerslide for fear you'll spin out of control or lose too much speed. It's also pointless to learn each car's handling quirks because the gameplay simply isn't deep enough to allow you to exploit terrain, suspension, or any manner of auto tuning.

■ After extensive debate, Howard decided he could indeed drive 55.

Combine this undistinguished feel with the game's pedestrian graphics and lack of Xbox Live or system-link support and you have one of the most disappointing big franchise games in recent memory. There's a nifty story at work in the single-player game, complete with slick rendered cut-scenes to accompany your journey in the "racing life," but it does little to elevate *Evolution* above mediocrity.

Che Chou

Five out of Ten

FORD RACING 2

Dev: Razorworks Pub: Empire Interactive Players: 1-2 Ford: Fairlane Origin: England Online: Yes

Razorworks has ponied up its second installment to the *Ford Racing* franchise, complete with a fleet of fine American-engineered cars to pilot over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house. And grandma's house is likely where this racer will stay, alongside your copy of *Lee Carvallo's Putting Challenge*. *Ford Racing 2* is heartily mediocre.

With a choice of more than 30 cars, trucks, and concept vehicles, *Racing*'s stable is far from barren, but with a single manufacturer supplying all the stock, you are bound to run into some runts. As anyone with a Calvin urinating on a Chevy logo bumper sticker can attest to, Ford's performance heritage does not extend to such cars as the Crown Victoria. Despite shortcomings in the vehicle department, you can still fantasize with Ford's version of the exotic (the GTO), a Focus Rally car, and even the newest iteration of the Mustang.

Tracks are infused with a degree of sideline activity and ambient noise, apparently to keep you entertained when you cruise by at nothing more than a casual gait. While the framerates are smoother than a baby's bottom, the speed doesn't give you that sense of impending sickness that one may feel at 120-plus mph.

■ Fun Fact: "Butter up a reviewer's butt" is a pretty gross image. We apologize wholeheartedly.

Xbox Live support is present with scoreboard rankings, but it is doubtless that an added online multiplayer mode could have salvaged good intentions and prolonged development. *Racing* is a competent racer with shine; unfortunately, the shine melts away faster than butter up a reviewer's butt.

Dave Ziganay

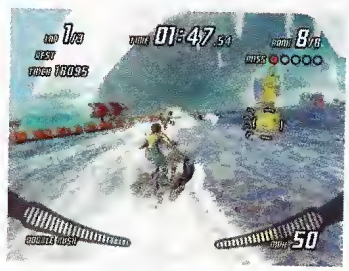
Five out of Ten

CARVE

Dev: Argonaut Pub: Take-Two Players: 1-8 Ski: Ball Origin: England Online: Yes

When it comes to jet ski racing on Xbox, pickings are slim, and this fact alone makes *Carve* stand out. Couple this with the game's sharp technical production and clean visuals, and those in the market for a water-based racer essentially have their decision made for them.

Truthfully, it's hard to find fault with *Carve*. It looks great, runs smoothly, and is certainly polished. The closest thing to an issue is the trick system—it's restrictive compared to what one would expect from one of these *SSX*-esque games. The sad reality is that there are very few tricks, and those that exist require very precise inputs. As a result, players aren't rewarded for jamming on buttons freestyle, as they'd expect to be. But the trick system, spartan as it is, is worked into the gameplay quite well, and functions solidly within the context of the game. It's simple: Players do a trick, and they're rewarded with an immediate boost in velocity. A boost gauge will also accumulate, so if they do enough tricks, they can activate a longer-lasting boost. When used in the right places, this can turn the tide of a race. When used incorrectly, it serves as a slapstick physics demo, as players will crash willy-nilly into every obstacle in their path.



■ Aquaman couldn't find a whale to ride, but decided Rosie O'Donnell was a good substitute.

Carve also boasts Xbox Live support for up to eight players. While the execution is nowhere near as ambitious as something like *Project Gotham Racing 2*, it's serviceable enough for those who prefer bikinis to asphalt. It's also a budget title, and cheap equals good.

Miguel Lopez

Seven out of Ten

MAGIC THE GATHERING: BATTLEGROUNDS

Dev: Secret Level Pub: Atari Players: 1-2 Gathering: Dust Origin: San Francisco, CA Online: Yes

Someone cast a spell of Dwindling Intelligence on the makers of *Magic the Gathering: Battlegrounds*. How else could anyone explain the decision to take a beloved turn-based, strategy-laden card game and turn it into a twitchy, real-time, arcade-style mess with approximately 100 percent less tactics?

Battlegrounds presents themed arenas, split down the middle. Battles are frantic affairs; opposing wizards must run around their half collecting mana crystals and shards in order to power their spells. Real-time combat means players have to juggle their 10-or-fewer-card decks while simultaneously casting spells, collecting mana, striking at enemy monsters, or shielding against hits. There's little, if any, room for thought. Speed replaces skill as the operative factor here, and players are oftentimes outgunned. With the proper amount of mana, A.I. foes hurl spell after spell without the slightest pause.

A horrid single-player quest mode offers frustrating, ill-designed scenarios. As with all the scenarios in this mode, *Battlegrounds* offers one (and only one) solution to a given problem. What's required of players is to find the right pattern and number of creatures and enchantments to cast. One mistake or a pause of a few seconds ensures an ignominious defeat.

■ The Green Monster was easily slain by Mr. Jason Giambi.

Online play makes the bad medicine go down, but it doesn't do anything to alter the fact that this magic eschews creativity and instead embraces the gunslinger's ethic of he-who-draws-fastest has the best chance of winning.

Greg Orlando

Four out of Ten

ARX FATALIS

Dev: Arkane Studios Pub: Dreamcatcher Players: 1 Dead Goblins: Abundant Origin: France Online: No

You know *Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*? Gigantic game world? Hundreds of hours of RPG gameplay? Right, that one. Think of *Arx Fatalis* as a sort of anti-*Morrowind*: It's a similar game, but one that tries to rein in some of the more gregarious faults of Bethesda's epic.

Borrowing freely from old PC chestnut *Ultima Underworld*, *Arx Fatalis* is a first-person game that doesn't treat you very kindly: You start out naked, in a jail cell, devoid of all memory except for a desire to see the sun again. The entire game is underground, filled with trolls and other creatures, and it's not very conducive to exploration in the buff. To survive, you'll need to think intelligently about character building—instead of *Morrowind*'s classes, you devote points to a variety of skills, gradually building your hero to be whomever you want him to be.

For such an unhyped RPG, *Fatalis* does a lot of things right. The game's dank caverns are rendered in pervasive detail, and the story's much more engrossing than you'd expect for a simple dungeon hack. The main problem is that the game's an unduly harsh taskmistress: The inventory control is needlessly fiddly, casting spells is awkward and ultimately more trouble than it's worth, and because of the vastness of the game world, it's extremely easy to miss a hint and completely lose track of the plotline. As with *Morrowind*, though, *Fatalis*' innate quality stands above all the glaring issues, and it's hard to stop playing once you take up the quest.

■ To evade the spider's curse, simply quote a Bible verse.

Kevin Gifford

Seven out of Ten

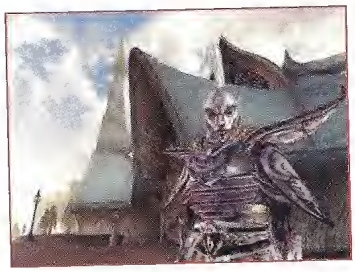
ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND GAME OF THE YEAR

Dev: Bethesda Softworks Pub: Bethesda Softworks Players: 1 III: For Thee Origin: Rockville, MD Online: No

Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind delivered the goods last year, proving to be not just the Xbox's top RPG (until *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* came along), but one of 2002's best games, period. How do you top that? Pack nearly 100 additional hours of gameplay onto a DVD, making the *Game of the Year* experience that much more fulfilling.

What you're getting this time around is a pair of PC expansion packs—*Tribunal* and *Bloodmoon*, which provide plenty of new terrain to explore, along with some new gameplay elements that spice things up. *Tribunal* offers the ability to hire mercenaries to watch your back as you scour the countryside, and *Bloodmoon* ups the ante by allowing you to become a werewolf (much like you could stalk the night as a vampire in the original game). These new options are perfect for the hardened *Morrowind* veteran, adding just the right amount of innovation to an already solid RPG, and fortunately, this edition is compatible with old save files.

There are some other cool enhancements marking an improvement over the old-school *Morrowind*—a life counter that pops up over enemies' heads during combat, some new armor and weaponry, and slightly better graphics and bug fixes. Here's the bottom line: If you liked *Morrowind*, this is more of the same, and you'll love it. If you haven't played it, this version is worth the $30 investment—that is, if you're willing to give up a couple hundred hours of your life.



■ It's amazing what a little silver sparkly paint and some tin foil can do.

Dan DiGiacomo

Eight out of Ten

SPHINX AND THE CURSED MUMMY

Dev: Eurocom Pub: THQ Players: 1 Sphinx: Jinx Origin: England Online: No

One of the saddest things to witness in gaming is a great idea held back by formulaic mediocrity. *Sphinx and the Cursed Mummy* is the love child of two disparate factions, one of which was imaginative and tried to produce a fine game, and the other group that deferred to the marketing shills in the matter of what makes a good game.

The titular Sphinx is your typical action-adventure hero. He runs, he jumps, he swings swords, rights wrongs, and what have you. He starts out competing with Horus for the Blade of Osiris, and then after some accidental teleportation, gets mixed up with the evil Set's latest scheme. Sphinx's portions of the game are traditional run, jump, and fight segments. Puzzles are lighter here, as Sphinx is more focused on the jumping and the sword-swinging. Along with Sphinx's pedestrian gameplay are problems such as an inability to lock on to targets and the tendency for the camera to get stuck in the silliest of places.

It's when you play as Tutankhamen that the game gets a lot better. After being turned from a bumbling prince into a nigh-indestructible mummy, you must subject Tut to such humiliations as burning, electrocution, and having essential body parts sliced in order to get through his puzzles. The lack of combat (or even a healthbar) translates into interesting, varied, and creative platform puzzles.

■ Of King Tut, comedian Steve Martin once said, "He gave his life for tourism."

Elementary use of math reveals that a mediocre Sphinx game combined with an excellent Cursed Mummy game averages out to an very solid and enjoyable Sphinx/Mummy hybrid.

Thierry Nguyen

Seven out of Ten

LEGACY OF KAIN: DEFIANCE

Sic semper sucker?

Dev: Crystal Dynamics
Pub: Eidos
Players: 1
Who is Worthy?: Both Raziel and Kain
Origin: Menlo Park, CA
Online: No

■ Our hero uses telekinesis to shake down the neighborhood kids for their lunch money, and sometimes to molest nuns. They had it coming!

One drinks blood, the other devours souls. One likes it rough, while the other prefers puzzles. One wears pants, and the other goes naked into the good night. They're Kain and Raziel—*Legacy of Kain: Defiance*'s dueling protagonists and videogames' original Odd Couple.

You play as both of these loquacious, overwrought vampires in *Defiance*, which is essentially *Soul Reaver 3* and the fifth game to bear the *Legacy of Kain* prefix. To properly explain the series' convoluted backstory would take a Herculean effort...one the developers aren't even willing to make. Eidos simply gives you the basics—Raziel hates Kain for turning him into a jawless, desiccated soul eater, but it's all part of the manipulative vampire lord's snakey, master plan—in an introductory movie, then sends you on your way to epic action-adventure. It might feel a bit like starting to watch a show midseason, but it works well enough.

Defiance improves upon earlier *Kain* games in several ways, though some elements aren't nearly as strong. Its visuals are slicker than ever before, creating a world populated with gorgeously detailed gothic structures, hauntingly ethereal ghost worlds, and broken-down graveyards, and they're brought to life by top-of-the-line voicework, music, and sound effects easily sitting at the top of their field. It's a shame the game's much-improved combat system—you can now juggle multiple opponents into the air à la Capcom's *Devil May Cry* or blast them off parapets or into spikes using telekinesis—comes at the cost of the series' near-perfect follow-camera. Although the new perspective isn't awful, it's less suited for platform jumping, and there are times when objects obscure your view during fights. The series' challenging puzzles have also been changed so the toughest part is figuring out where to go within a succession of similar-looking environments. And while the combat is at least 10 times more fun than it was before (especially when you wade into large groups of foes), there aren't nearly enough different enemy types in the game.

■ The Angel of Vengeance's second cousin, the Angel of Unexplained Flatulence Ridiculously Blamed on the Family Dog, served to provide our vampiric hero with a stiff challenge.

The twisty story is compelling enough to pull you through the game like a **rabbit tied to a rush-hour train**

Even though *Defiance* holds a few key flaws, not all is black. The twisty story is compelling enough to pull you through the game like a rabbit tied to a rush-hour train, and there are a handful of key points—such as when Raziel and Kain finally meet, when villain Moebius runs afoul of the toothy twosome, and several boss fights—that are fantastic set pieces. Better still, the game finally wraps up the series' numerous plotlines, and in a satisfying way at that. As with any long journey, you'll have been both thrilled and frustrated by the end of *Defiance*, but you'll find this ride worth its price of admission.

Joe Fielder

Seven out of Ten

The Men Behind the Vampires

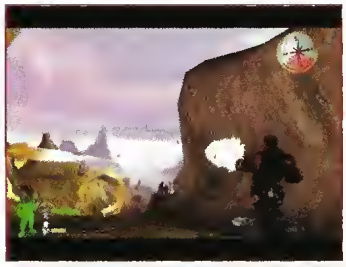
Voice actors for the *Legacy of Kain* series have popped up in TV shows, games, and animated movies. *Kain*'s Simon Templeton appeared in the TV series *Angel* and *NYPD Blue*, and voiced Sith characters in the recent *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. Raziel's Michael Bell was Duke (above) in the *G.I. Joe* animated series.

■ Use this screenshot as a cautionary tale and heed well its warning: Never let your mom take your best sword and put it in the washing machine.

ARMED AND DANGEROUS

Armed with a sense of humor and dangerously fun

Dev: Planet Moon Studios
Pub: LucasArts
Players: 1
Dangerous: Liaisons
Origin: Sausalito, CA
Online: No



■ If there's a problem random and/or senseless acts of violence can't solve, frankly, we don't want to know what it is.

When the lepers need saving or—more to the point—when the important pieces of the lepers need saving, who are you going to call? In this case, the Lionhearts, led by the human Roman, will do just nicely. And when there's a desperate need for a third-person shooter delicately blending the notion of restorative tea, anal-probe humor, landsharks, and the death of tyranny, LucasArts' *Armed and Dangerous* has things well in hand.

As Roman, players must exercise their God-given right to shoot bad guys, blow stuff up, and wreak a fine mayhem. In *Dangerous*, nearly everything explodes in a satisfying way, and there's a sort of mischievous glee to be unearthed here while storming the levels like some modern-day Genghis Khan, destroying stuff and stacking the corpses. Buildings expel huge chunks of concrete and bodies. Segmented pipes go up one seam after another. Enemy barracks, when assaulted, send their roofs rocketing straight up into the sky. Arches can be destroyed and used to crush foes standing under them. Rolling boulders flatten foes in their path. Violence bears delightful rewards.

A breathless sort of adventure awaits. Machine gun emplacements can be assaulted from a distance with a sniper rifle or flanked and quickly put out of action, but doing so eliminates the simple manic fun of storming them head-on, guns blazing and bullet trails whizzing by. *Dangerous* does a wonderful job of providing these simple, action-packed moments, regardless of whether Roman's flying about with the aid of a jetpack or simply manning a rail-based cannon and ripping the heart out of a massed assault. Embarking on the game's destruction train gives players access to dandy weapons such as the Shark Gun, a portable black hole, and the Topsy-Turvy, a device that flips the game world so upside-down enemies fall off the ground and land with a deadly thud when things right themselves.

In spots, *Dangerous* kicks like a mule, presenting stages that can't be beaten without many retries, solid tactics, and great luck. One rain-swept mountain stage holds a winding path that must be traversed at all hazards, but snipers take a deadly toll on the player's hero, well-armored cannons shoot rockets with great accuracy, and foot soldiers with machine guns tear Roman up like a dog will a chew toy. Beset from all sides, the game becomes an exercise in first getting to a checkpoint and then trying different tactics to see what works. The great difficulty, combined with the excellent weapons and suitably wonky sense of humor, works as motivation to get to the end, especially when the game gets repetitive, offering, say, its fourth rail-gun shooting challenge.

Greg Orlando

■ Rescuing the unwashed peasants is but one of the many challenges Roman must face in his everyday existence as freedom fighter and leader of the Lionhearts.

Embarking on the game's destruction train gives players access to dandy weapons such as the shark gun.

Comedy Gold!

Armed and Dangerous takes at least two potshots at George Lucas' *Star Wars*. The rebel Lionhearts reenact the tauntaun scene from *Empire Strikes Back* (culminating with someone stuck in something's ass) and parody the Jedi mind trick where the suggestion, "You're French!" sends enemy soldiers fleeing in a panic.

■ Ah, the Vindaloo Rockets. They provide a spicy alternative to your average rocket, and can be upgraded to Super Vindaloo Rockets, which provide for more explosive fun.

Eight out of Ten

CABELA'S DANGEROUS HUNTS

Dev: Fun Labs Pub: Activision Players: 1 Bearly: Legal Origin: Romania Online: No

Cabela's Dangerous Hunts stands as the logical evolution of the deer-hunting sims clogging the shelves of Wal-Mart. It's more extreme; the deer aren't sitting there licking rocks all day anymore. In fact, there are no deer at all. They've been replaced by predators such as wolves and grizzly bears—both of which would land you in jail if you hunted them in real life—and you must bag these beasts in the game's career mode.

Since the animals run right up and attack you, *Hunts* is less staid deer-hunting strategy and more balls-out blast-a-thon. Or, at least, it should have been. Instead, the game tries to be both arcade shooter and hunting sim at once, with mostly disastrous results.

As with Activision's *Deer Hunt* series, you have a startling array of guns at your disposal, and picking off targets from long range is possible with practice. At close quarters, though, things get frustrating. For some reason, the game shifts to a "predator's-eye" view just before something attacks your hunter, all but guaranteeing that he'll be disoriented and bleeding like a hemophiliac once he's spotted. Weapons at close range are worthless, too, as the hunting knife is far too slow to be an effective melee weapon.

■ Meet exotic animals on your various explorations, and then shoot them in the face.

Hunts may not look like steamed crap—its forest vistas are scarily well-detailed, even by full-price game standards—but its lack of focus makes the game unpalatable to both hunting fans and Xbox shooter nuts. You'd have to be very sick of *Halo* and *Counter-Strike* to even consider this one.

Kevin Gifford

Three out of Ten

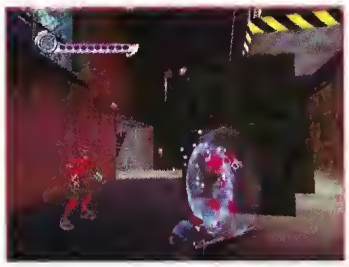
CARMEN SANDIEGO: THE SECRET OF THE STOLEN DRUMS

Dev: A2M Pub: Bam! Entertainment Players: 1 Spy: Kids Origin: Canada Online: No

If it weren't for the original *Carmen Sandiego* games, nobody would know what Nepal's flag looks like. If it weren't for the '90s PBS game show, nobody would know what a cappella sounds like. If this game didn't exist, on the other hand, then the Xbox would simply have one less cookie-cutter platformer.

It's not that *Carmen Sandiego: The Secret of the Stolen Drums* is a failure—it just aims low in the first place. The original's educational trappings are mostly gone, replaced by a kid who looks like he's from *Captain Planet* smashing small crates, hopping onto larger crates, and bopping fearsome monsters with a standard-issue platform-hero stick. A bit of stealth action is involved at times, but otherwise it's jump, bash, and collect random floaty things until the credits run.

The game is remarkable, really, in its harmlessness. Nothing's been show-stoppingly bungled in the execution, save for a camera that gets stuck behind walls and bothers you endlessly. The challenge isn't even particularly frustrating—even if you die, the only penalty is being placed a few yards away from your point of death.



■ Bang the stolen drums not slowly but not at all. Because they've been stolen.

Still, consider for a moment: This last Christmas brought a torrent of original platformers—*Prince of Persia*, *Beyond Good & Evil*, *Metal Arms: Glitch in the System*, and even *Whiplash*—to Xbox. Before you even consider *Drums*, ask yourself this: Have you really run out of better titles to play? And if so, shouldn't you be going out more anyway?

Kevin Gifford

Five out of Ten

TOM AND JERRY: WAR OF THE WHISKERS

Dev: VIS Entertainment Pub: NewKidCo Players: 1-4 Of Mice: And Men Origin: Scotland Online: Yes

Diehard Tom and Jerry purists who somehow missed *Tom and Jerry: War of the Whiskers* on PlayStation 2 can breathe a sigh of relief—your favorite cat-and-mouse duo has finally landed on Xbox. The other 99.7 percent of the population will be best served by simply overlooking this subpar cartoon smash-em-up.

The subject matter won't entice many modern gamers. Even if you do cherish those fond memories of sadistic feline/murine violence from your youth, odds are you won't recognize half of the characters or locations here. (The scraping of *Tom and Jerry*'s barrel of source material may be best illustrated by a face-off between Duckling and Robot Cat.) With only nine characters in the game, *these* were the best available?

Whiskers' developer VIS Entertainment took its gameplay inspiration from a good source—Capcom's classic Dreamcast brawler *Power Stone*. But as Atari's misguided Xbox effort *Loons: Fight for Fame* proved, putting four cartoon characters in a room full of chairs doesn't guarantee results. Here, the problem is one of balance. There's very little incentive to pick up objects or experiment with combos, because every character's three-punch combo works so well. You can easily use this simple maneuver to beat every foe in the game.

■ Tom and Jerry paved the way Itchy and Scratchy, as well as for Bush and Cheney.

Beyond the lame characters and infantile gameplay, *Whiskers*' trappings aren't half bad. The peppy ragtime soundtrack is actually quite entertaining, but, then again, you can get cartoons with silly music for free on television. In fact, do that instead.

Shane Bettenhausen

Three out of Ten

MTV'S CELEBRITY DEATHMATCH

Dev: Gotham Games Pub: Gotham Games Players: 1-2 Match: Made in Hell Online: No

MTV's Celebrity Deathmatch is the *Howard the Duck* of videogames, with the actual game disc, one supposes, coming steaming hot from Howard's nether regions.

Simply put, if you're looking for a deep fighting game with intricate moves and gameplay, this ain't it. *Deathmatch*'s sole draw is the chance to whack away at a dozen or so second-rate celebrities such as Anna Nicole Smith, Tommy Lee, and Mr. T, and its charm wears off in less time than it takes to read this review. The gameplay consists of simple, repetitive button mashing that halfheartedly apes the animated show's over-the-top combat, bolstered by subpar graphics and lame humor. Perhaps the only complement to the visuals is the gradual damage the player models accrue as they hammer upon one another—beating the members of N*Sync to a bloody pulp does have its merits.

Deathmatch's single-player season mode consists of six episodes featuring three matches each, and completing subsequent episodes unlocks new characters and arenas.

■ Mistress Cleo predicts a lot of pain for The Worm and also for anyone who plays this game.

This is unfortunate on two levels. One, it's possible to speed through all six episodes in about an hour. Two, the unlockable characters aren't new celebrities, but rather, a Halloween-themed assortment featuring Frankenstein's monster, the Mummy, and company. There's no rhyme or reason to pitting Shannen Doherty against the Wolfman, but then, there's really no reason to purchase this stinker of a fighting game.

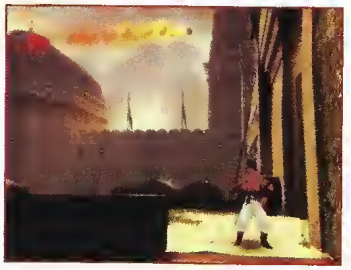
Dan DiGiacomo

Two out of Ten

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME

A prince among peasants

Dev: Ubisoft Montreal
Pub: Ubisoft
Players: 1
Time: Is on Your Side
Origin: Canada
Online: No



■ The game's plot sees the Prince of Persia battling to undo the evil he caused when he unleashed the Sands of Time. Damn you, hubris!

The original *Prince of Persia* titles were a testament to creator Jordan Mechner's genius. Now 13 years after the first game, Mechner (along with a very talented Ubisoft development team) is back with the latest chapter in the *Persia* saga, and the result is nothing short of a videogame masterpiece.

Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time is at once visually stylish and technologically accomplished. The exotic and dusty look of the castle and its surroundings take on a fairytale appearance, thanks to generous helpings of haze, saturated lighting, and swirling particle effects. But the levels are more than impressive architectural feats; they serve as a massive, mind-bending playground, rife with puzzles and platforming challenges.

Thankfully, getting from here to there never feels like a chore—even when you've got to use more brains than brawn. Action puzzles that may appear initially daunting always follow a logical progression, and the level designers are careful to never betray the player with arbitrary leaps of logic. As such, *Time* is brimming with heart-stopping moments where you've got to take big gambles, like running alongside a wall to catapult for a bar which enables you to swing over a bottomless chasm.

Pulling off these seemingly complex acrobatics is a breeze, due to the game's intuitive controls and feel. The challenge here isn't wrestling with the abstraction of an analog stick in 3D space, but rather, nailing a series of huge, risky moves with perfect timing and grace. To a limited extent, you can reverse your last mistake, making moot the drag of trial-and-error gameplay plaguing many 3D platformers.

■ We'll take pointless videogame trivia for $400, Alex. The Prince of Persia is one of two characters in this issue's Xrated section who can run on walls. Name the other one.

As such, ***Sands* is brimming with heart-stopping moments** where you've got to take big gambles

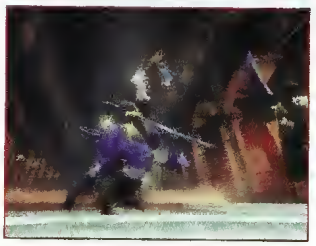
The game's stylized realism also extends to its combat system. Always outnumbered, you need to constantly prioritize which foe to attack first, and which to defend against. Methods of dispatching these demons can be as stylish or repetitious as you choose; whether it's bouncing off of walls to dive headlong into enemies or knocking them into the air in slow motion, and returning to finish the task seconds later. The one strike against the game is that there's an unfortunate lack of enemy variety, which, at times, makes combat wearisome.

Despite this shortcoming, *Time* stands as an incredible accomplishment in game design; a perfect union of storytelling, gameplay, and technological wonder. This isn't just one of the best games in the Xbox library, it's one of the best adventure games ever made, on any system. It sucks you in wholeheartedly and doesn't let go until the last grains of sand have run down its magical hourglass.

Che Chou

Ten out of Ten

The Dagger of Time



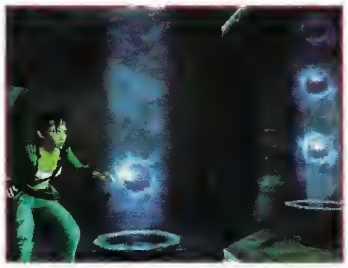
The Prince's dagger is the single most important device in the game. Aside from being able to reverse time and correct a fatal jump, it also possesses cool combat powers, allowing it to freeze enemies temporarily to even your odds in a fight, or use its bullet time feature to slow down time during a scuffle.

■ The Prince of Persia, after many adventures, finally discovered the site where the ancient Phoenicians roasted their hot dogs.

BEYOND GOOD & EVIL

Beyond Excellent

Dev: Ubisoft
Pub: Ubisoft
Players: 1
Photo: Unrealistic
Origin: France
Online: No



■ Jade earns money, precious money, which she cen use to buy stuff, by photographing Hillys' wildlife.

This time, the revolution will indeed be televised. With the planet Hillys under constant assault, heroine Jade and her comrade Pey'j the pig-man find themselves immersed in a grand conspiracy. Hillys' defenders are anything but, and with her camera Jade attempts to bring the truth to the masses.

Beyond Good & Evil offers a remarkable story; a compelling cast of characters who, despite their oftentimes cartoonish appearance, emerge as fully developed humans; and a third-person adventure that leaps and soars. Over the course of eight or so hours, the game takes players through a series of enemy-held installations and it's Jade's job to document the horrors within. Simple puzzles require her to avoid the steely-eyed gaze of the enemy guards, or to creep up behind them and kick them where it hurts—the gas tank most of them carry on their backs. It's possible to brawl past enemies, but oftentimes more rewarding in terms of feelings of accomplishment to use the environments creatively—say, crouching in fog or using a series of moving crates to shield our heroine from sight—to avoid detection. Varied minigames allow her to pilot a hovercraft and spaceship, play a disc-based challenge, and earn cash by photographing Hillys' animal population. Each is well done and adds greatly to the overall experience.

All the while, the developers never fail to throw in simple, human moments such as when Jade sits on top of a cliff practicing meditation with one of the children under her care. Later, she jokingly tells Pey'j to stop mentioning that he was almost turned into smoked pork because it's making her hungry. As the truth surfaces, players will note the game's once indifferent bit players leaving their taxis and garages to stand out on the streets, openly raging against the machine. Players are made to feel as if they're interacting with real characters in a dynamic world.

■ Beware, Jade. Those Jehovah's Witnesses are damn persistent. And they've got literature, too! There is no escape from *The Watchtower.*

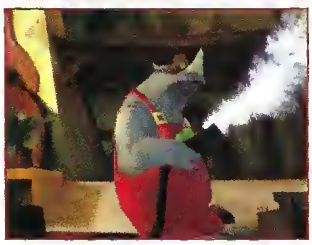
Players are made to feel as if they're interacting with real characters in a dynamic world

The game loses steam at its conclusion, as Jade's true origin receives but a glossing over, making the player wonder exactly what is going on with the photojournalist turned world savior. Worse still, its end bosses come straight out of the box. Ubisoft alternately phones in a cheap, *Panzer Dragoon Orta*-style shootout with players attacking a series of weak spots on a seemingly never-exploding spaceship, and then introduces a final villain who takes multiple forms, clones Jade's compatriots and sics evil versions of them on her, and finally requires rote pattern memorization to defeat. After such a set of brilliant adventures, *Evil* can only throw up a halfhearted resolution and, as an afterthought, an ominous warning that happily ever after simply doesn't exist.

Greg Orlando

Nine out of Ten

Go To Mammago!



The Mammago garage in *Beyond Good & Evil* is a one-stop shop for all Jade's hovercraft and spaceship needs. Mammago is run by a family of Rastafarian rhinoceros, including the seldom, if ever, seen Mama. When you have to go, frankly, it's gotta be Mammago. But watch out. They don't take Visa. Only pearls.

■ Fun Fact: Pey'j is technically a boar. And this caption is a bore. Oddly enough, it's been written by a boor. Not to be confused with e Boer.

ROBIN HOOD: DEFENDER OF THE CROWN

Dev: Cinemaware Pub: Capcom Players: 1 Hood: Winked Origin: Burlingame, CA Online: No

They (the Bad People) love to take fine old 2D games only to muck with their magic by adding a third dimension. The classic PC and Nintendo Entertainment System game ***Robin Hood: Defender of the Crown*** is an object lesson in why they should leave well enough alone.

Translating gameplay from the second dimension to the third takes effort and thought. The series of minigames found here, once fun on the Amiga or wherever you first encountered them, were okay at the time. But just taking the same mechanics and putting them into 3D doesn't really work, because the added dimension expands the possibilities and, with it, the expectations. Moving forward on a horse in a jousting match isn't as exciting now as it was when people expected only left-to-right movement. One-on-one duels in a castle are boring after you've played ***Dynasty Warriors***. And sniping from a treetop position—the main addition to the gameplay here—is still nothing that hasn't been done better in countless first-person shooters.

■ Robin Hood and the footman battled for days over who got to polish the skeletons.

More glaring than the minigames' poor quality is their length, as each one takes several minutes to complete, and repeats ad nauseum. They'd have been much more tolerable had they been used as spice instead of dressing for the tactical game this wants to be. Not that the strategy elements are very good either—they're actually very unbalanced—but hey, the Xbox has a dearth of strategy games, and with some fine-tuning this could have been a good one. Pity.

Nich Maragos

Four out of Ten

STAR WARS JEDI KNIGHT: JEDI ACADEMY

Dev: Raven Software Pub: LucasArts Players: 1-8 Jedi: Blight? Origin: Madison, WI Online: Yes

Adventure, excitement—a Jedi does crave these things. And now that Xbox gamers are stroking their laser swords at the thought of another Force-fueled adventure set in that galaxy yada, yada, yada. Sorry to rain bantha poodo on the party, but the report card is in: ***Star Wars Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy*** is not the cool school players were hoping for.

Sure, the syllabus is nifty. Players enroll in Luke Skywalker's School of Force-craft and Wizardry as a Padawan greenhorn whose assignments lead to full Jedi-hood—or a chance to letter in dark side evildoing in the senior year. Missions come in a stellar variety, too. One has players hopping on rocks to avoid vibration-sensing sandworms. Players get to zip around on speederbikes (albeit unresponsive ones) and tauntauns, plus have run-ins with characters—including Chewbacca and Boba Fett—from the "good" Star Wars flicks.

■ "Bob, I am your father. I am also the man who let the dogs out. Whoop! Whoop!"

But ***Academy*** isn't so much a first-person shooter (although there are nifty rayguns) as it is a third-person lightsaber hack-em-up, and the lasersword combat here is about as graceful as that tubby ***Star Wars*** kid (Google him for a preview). Jabbing the attack button sends a swordsman into a saber-swinging tantrum that feels so...random. Even when duels are won, there's no sense of what was done right. Fortunately, the cumbersome-to-wield Force powers shake things up a bit and are especially fun in the online modes, which save this school from a flunking grade.

Crispin Boyer

Five out of Ten

BLOWOUT

Dev: Terminal Reality Pub: Majesco Players: 1 Blow: Up Origin: Dallas, TX Online: No

In the fine tradition of exploration-based games such as ***Super Metroid*** comes ***Blowout***, the latest addition to Majesco's expanding family of discount titles.

The premise is cut-and-paste sci-fi: Interstellar cop John "Dutch" Cane is tapped to clean out a derelict spaceship infested by alien clone monster...things. The one-man army outnumbered by unspeakable horror cliché is in full effect, but ***Blowout***'s dialogue and overall production value are sufficiently self-aware so that they're oddly amusing.

Refreshingly, the action takes place on a 2D plane: Dutch runs to his left and his right, navigating through the ship's 10 massive levels. Normally, this sounds like an exciting prospect, but the levels are almost too big for their own good, with superfluous nooks and crannies needlessly funneling you through destructible walls with "secrets" that are usually no more exciting than more shotgun ammo. Logical design is ignored in favor of cramming in as much excitement as possible. One fears employment on the

■ In a 2D world crying out for vengeance, sometimes you need a 3D hero like "Dutch" Cane.

Honour Guard: "Can you take this sample down to the lab for me? Thanks, see you in six weeks." The other annoyance is the game's camera (in a 2D game, no less!). It will often be zoomed in too close to the action or off-balance to the left or right, obscuring the view of attacking monsters.

There's obviously a reason why ***Blowout*** costs as much as it does, but then again, in the history of $10 games, you've been subjected to much worse.

Andrew Pfister

Six out of Ten

THE HOBBIT

Dev: Inevitable Entertainment Pub: Sierra Players: 1 Hoppin: Boppit Origin: Austin, TX Online: No

If modern platformers are represented by tightly designed, cinematic productions such as ***Voodoo Vince***, then ***The Hobbit*** is an example of what the genre was like a generation ago. It's the sort of game where you must collect so much junk the story itself plays second fiddle; the sort where you realize that Bilbo Baggins' dash maneuver (a sort of pole-vault jump) is faster than running, so you go through the whole game pole-vaulting forward like a ninny.

Hobbit's story—taken almost verbatim from J.R.R. Tolkien's book—is hurried along through 11 levels of rock hopping and wolf whacking. Every stage has a laundry list of quests to complete, with more made available by talking to people you encounter along the way. Although your tasks are varied (ranging from collecting firewood to sneaking around a troll encampment), they all boil down to the same platform silliness—collect five of this, 17 of that, pull a switch or two, and everything just sort of works out.

It's not that this action is executed poorly. At its best, ***Hobbit*** is a solid

■ Bilbo's magic sword glows whenever a pointless caption is nearby.

little romp, with tricky puzzles and some truly exciting sequences (such as the encounter with Smaug the dragon). These small sparks of inspiration are too infrequent, however, and the game's cutesy-poo ***Jim Henson's Hobbit Babies*** look will turn off much of its potential audience before it becomes hooked. It took years for developers to make a great ***Lord of the Rings*** game. It may take many more for its prequel to get the same treatment.

Kevin Gifford

Five out of Ten

DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION ULTRAMIX

Dev: Konami
Pub: Konami
Players: 1-2

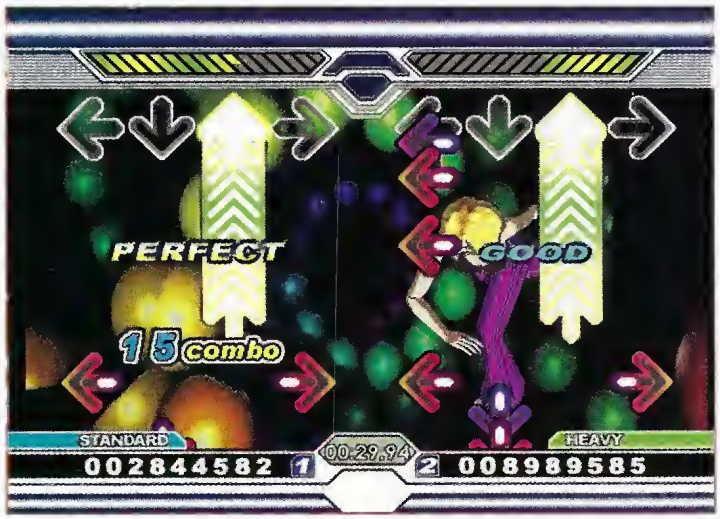
Dance: Aholic
Origin: Honolulu, HI
Online: Yes

■ Former boxer Afro Thunder found new work at The Great Texas Beefcake Depository on Route 51.

There are many humans who feel guilty for sitting on their swelling asses while indulging in their favorite pastime: videogames. Now there is cause for elation among the bloated; Konami has brought its famed rhythm-based *Dance Dance Revolution* franchise to Xbox.

Hardcore *Revolution* fans will be most excited by features debuting in *Ultramix*, primarily Xbox Live support, allowing players to download new songs and dance steps (for a fee, natch), as well as compete online. Beyond the edit mode for customizing steps and the calorie-tracking workout mode, there's also a hearty challenge mode demanding players try to get perfect steps all the way through a song.

Beginners and those who lack a natural rhythm will be disappointed, though. Unlike the recently released *DDRMax2* for PlayStation 2, *Ultramix* lacks a lesson mode, which allows players to gradually learn key moves, or an easier beginner setting. There's also brutal commentary pointing out players' suckitude, and there are few songs with a low-difficulty rating—especially surprising given the



game's 45-plus library.

Even with the Live component, one could also argue that half the fun of *Revolution* games is either watching others completely spaz out or performing astonishing, jaw-dropping footwork—neither of which is palpable while looking at online stats. Still, there's no denying *Ultramix*'s fun factor, especially when using a dance pad. So shut up and dance.

Carrie Shepherd

Eight out of Ten

NHL RIVALS 2004

Dev: Microsoft
Pub: Microsoft
Players: 1-4

Ice, Ice: Baby
Origin: Redmond, WA
Online: Yes

■ Question: Could God make a stapler so big that it could be used to put a staple in the Staples Center?

Launching a new hockey franchise against the likes of Sega's masterful *ESPN NHL Hockey* and EA's superb *NHL 2004* is no small task. Despite the stiff competition, Microsoft's inaugural edition of *NHL Rivals* manages to hold its own as a competent, but ultimately flawed, sim.

Aesthetically, *Rivals* doesn't disappoint. The graphics are on par with other current-generation hockey games, and the audio is surprisingly solid, with intelligent commentary and fantastic crowd sounds. All the usual modes and features are intact, as is support for online play over Xbox Live. Where the game falters is in the A.I. of CPU players; simply put, these guys fell kicking and screaming from the artificial-intelligence tree. Even with the difficulty cranked up, they do dumb stuff such as passing off to a defenseman at the point on a clear breakaway or getting caught up in the boards with no one else in sight. Penalty calling is inconsistent, too. It's frustrating and greatly detracts from what could have otherwise been a very solid first outing.

One thing *Rivals* has going for it is

support for online leagues and tournaments through XSN Sports. This adds an awful lot to online play and keeps the game from being totally insignificant in the face of its more esteemed competition. If Microsoft can work on the brains behind *Rivals*' brawn next year and add more exclusive content (something akin to, say, Sega's skybox mode), the game might just become a contender.

John Ricciardi

Six out of Ten

PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 2

Near-perfection is the driving force here

Dev: Bizarre Creations
Pub: Microsoft
Players: 1-8
Best: Live
Origin: England
Online: Yes

■ Fun Fact: The *Project Gotham Racing* series got its start on the Sega Dreamcast, where it was called *Metropolis Street Racer*.

With *Project Gotham Racing 2*, Bizarre Creations has done more than simply pit eight players in an online tooth-and-nail battle to the finish line—although that element certainly exists. This is also the first console game to truly embrace the online philosophy of not just competition, but community.

The extent to which *Racing* is integrated into Xbox Live begins, surprisingly, with its lengthy single-player game. As you work your way through *Racing*'s various career mode challenges, honing your skills with various sets of autos, your fastest lap times are uploaded and globally ranked for all to see on Xbox Live. So even as you burn rubber via *Racing*'s sweetly balanced hybrid of arcade and sim gameplay physics in solitude, you possess a communal awareness of how you fare in the big picture. What's more, each entry on the rankings chart also comes with a ghost image of how that particular player pulled off such fast lap times, allowing you to beat the game in its linear fashion and to passively take down other players as well.

The Kudos point-reward system makes its return in *Racing*, but now it's been both tuned and integrated into the game's Xbox Live connectivity. While driving stylishly in single-player mode still racks up Kudos, spending time online will also score you points, all of which accumulate into your universal Kudos ranking. At a glance, you can pick out veteran road racers from neophytes online, allowing you to gauge your competition as well as build a reputation in the *Racing* community. Playing the game through Xbox Live is literally like having a shared arcade machine in your living room.

■ In the leaning city of West Haverbrook (former home of the Monorail), the pizzas deliver humans and things generally tend to roll downhill.

Playing the game through Xbox Live is literally like **having a shared arcade machine** in your living room.

As with most competitive games, multiplayer over Xbox Live is where *Racing* really shines. Thanks to the wide variety of places and cars, battling live opponents always remains a fresh proposition.

Racing stumbles in two areas. For a game stressing online individualism, you can't customize your ride. *Racing* also has some of the most aggressive and infuriating A.I. drivers ever seen. These computer drones hug the race line so hard they'll happily knock you into the dirt just for driving where they need to be. These aside aren't deal breakers, but they do detract from an otherwise flawless experience.

What ultimately makes *Racing* groundbreaking is Bizarre Creations' understanding that taking the series onto the Information Superhighway means more than just slapdash head-to-head racing modes. This is the finest Xbox racer to date, and the first game to fully realize the potential of Xbox Live. Kudos to that.

Che Chou

Nine out of Ten

Obsessive/Compulsive

Project Gotham Racing 2 is a game obsessed with automobiles. As such, you'll be able to not only buy cars from a traditional menu-driven interface, but also stroll through your own personal garage or a massive auto mall brimming with sparkling new cars. It's trivial, sure, but very immersive all the same.

■ No longer confined to just a few cities, *Project Gotham Racing 2* features scores of new tracks set in diverse urban locales as Chicago, Edinburgh, Florence, Yokohama, and Moscow.

FALLOUT: BROTHERHOOD OF STEEL

Dev: Interplay Pub: Interplay Players: 1-2 Fallout: Fall-In Origin: Irvine, CA Online: No

Unfortunately, with classic brands comes the cashing in of said brand by plastering it over everything in sight. *Fallout* was a classic PC RPG, and *Fallout 2* was a great follow-up. With the recent cancellation of *Fallout 3*, the Fallout community feels that putting out *Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel* is a total smear and an example of Interplay whoring the *Fallout* name. *Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel* is not nearly that bad.

One could easily describe *Steel* as either *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* with guns or, alternately, *Hunter: The Fallouting*. That is, you've got yourself a basic action-RPG replete with guns, knives, and mutants. You go to town to trade in goods, talk to NPCs, and take quests to either kill something or bring something back, which serve as thin excuses to go down into dungeons to fight legions of baddies. Once in a while, you level up and put points towards skills/perks such as "Gun Skill," "Desert Skill," or "Man's Best Friend." All this is laced with some sophomoric humor dressed in Mad Max's hand-me-down clothing.

■ The Brotherhood of Steel quickly decimated The Brotherhood of Winsome Scamps.

What makes an otherwise solid action RPG mediocre is the obscenely slow and tedious beginning. You spend a good few hours fighting mostly rats, radscorpions, and spiders. Sure, it's common to start off with some easy enemies—but for three freakin' hours!? Eventually, the game gets more interesting, but that's like saying this flick is pretty good once you get past the first hour of nothing but bowel movements.

Thierry Nguyen

Five out of Ten

CURSE: THE EYE OF ISIS

Dev: Wanadoo Pub: Dreamcatcher Players: 1 Walk: Liks an Egyptian Origin: England Online: No

Few things put more fear into the superstitious rubes at *Xbox Nation* than the evil eye, bad juju, fear itself, severed horse heads and, of course, the straightforward Egyptian-style curse. Now Dreamcatcher gives everyone something new to fear: extended sessions with the third-person adventure *Curse: The Eye of Isis*.

The graphic equivalent of a brown-paper bag, *Isis* paints its creepy world with gunmetal grays, deep umbers, and blacks. Under normal circumstances, this would instill a sense of foreboding, but the artists' heavy hand renders everything as one big dreary smear. Generic enemies display a similar lack of panache; beyond being blearily rendered and poorly animated, they're so easily evaded and defeated, they might as well not have been included in the game.

Isis strives to be *Resident Evil*, but ends up as its less-palatable ward, *Resident Unpleasant*. Poorly tuned boss battles where players must target specific weak spots, and a lousy weapon firing system that insists on two simultaneous trigger pulls and a controller button press to target and shoot team up to remove the wind from *Isis*' sails. At one point, the game's female lead battles a huge reanimated animal corpse that's easy to put down, but hard to kill because the game gives no visual or textual clues as to how it's to be done. Here, players must locate a machine to operate a hook to impale the monster, but there's no hint the machine even functions. Turn a blind eye to this curse.

■ The disco inferno turned deadly and only Sir Edmund with the lead feet wes saved.

Greg Orlando

Four out of Ten

CONFLICT: DESERT STORM II — BACK TO BAGHDAD

Dev: Gotham Games Pub: Gotham Games Players : 1 Conflict: Resolution New York, NY Online: No

■ Practice diplomacy with extreme prejudice as you introduce the Bill of Rights to Iraq.

Travel back to when the U.S. military's commander was the George Bush without the Baby New Year's ears, but be warned, *Conflict: Desert Storm II—Back to Baghdad* is easily eclipsed by its competition. It does, however, deliver an afternoon's worth of fun for those not wanting to be bogged down in the minutiae of Clancyville.

Russell Garbutt

Six out of Ten

WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP POOL 2004

Dev: EA Interactive Pub: Jaleco Ent. Players : 1-2 Fool: Por Pool Origin: England Online: Yes

■ Sink or swim, baby. Get it? Sink! That's some unexpurgated pool humor for you.

World Championship Pool 2004's single-player experience is passable, but feels unpolished as graphical missteps, glitches, and the occasional game crash get in your way. However, when playing against human opponents of varying skill levels on Xbox Live, the game becomes surprisingly fun and entertaining.

Russell Garbutt

Five out of Ten

SILENT SCOPE COMPLETE

Dev: KCE Pub: Konami Digital Entertainment Players : 1-2 Rest: In Psece Origin: Japan Online: No

■ ProTip: Remember to yell, "This one's for you, William Howerd Taft!" before shooting your gun.

Silent Scope Complete collects all of Konami's sniper epics, and while this set is—arguably—a "value," it's a short-lived one-trick pony that's pretty much run its course; improvements from edition to edition are miniscule, at best, and to make more substantial changes would detract from its very singular thrill.

David Chen

Five out of Ten

CROUCHING TIGER HIDDEN DRAGON

Dev : Lightweight Pub : Ubisoft Players: 1 Paper: Tiger Origin: Japan Online: No

■ The tiger isn't moving, let alone crouching. The dragon is in hiding for a reeson.

Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon is as bad as you can get and still have something that runs. Anything resembling compelling level design or effective camera control was left on the cutting-room floor. A badly designed game could have the decency to look nice, but *Dragon* couldn't be bothered to offer even that one courtesy.

Dave Smith

Two out of Ten

XBOX SELECTA

EVERY XBOX GAME EVER RATED

GAME	DEV.	PUB.	COMMENTS	XBN RATING
4x4 Evolution 2	Terminal Reality	God Games	Off-roading that could be more compelling.	4
Aggressive Inline	Z-Axis	AKA Acclaim	If Tony Hawk wore wheels on his feet.	7
Airforce Delta Storm	Konami	Konami	Air combat done slightly wrong.	4
Aliens vs. Predator: Extinction	Zono	Electronic Arts	Bogged down by RTSness, but fun nonetheless.	6
All-Star Baseball 2004	Acclaim	Acclaim	Don't rush the mound, or you vaporize.	3
All-Star Baseball 2003	Acclaim	Acclaim	Don't look for detail here. They forgot to put any in.	4
Altar Echo	Dutraga	THQ	Something that one only half wants to play.	5
Amped 2	Microsoft	Microsoft	Harsh physics toned down, and online added. Well done.	8
Amped: Snowboarding	Microsoft	Microsoft	Realism doesn't cut it when the controls are wonky.	6
Antz Extreme Racing	Empire Interactive	Empire Interactive	Terrible all around.	2
Apex	Milestone	Atari	Licensed cars punish player's inertia. Coincidence?	8
Aquaman: Battle for Atlantis	TDK Mediactive	TDK Mediactive	Underwater tedium with irrelevant story.	3
Arctic Thunder	IP	Midway	Snowblowing vehicular combat that could be better.	5
ATV Quad Power Racing 2	Climax	Acclaim	Tricks difficult to perform, hilarity ensues.	5
Azurik: Rise of Perathia	Adrenium Games	Microsoft	Clearly rushed. Rotten voice acting, lame puzzles, and more!	3
Backyard Wrestling	Paradox Development	Eidos Interactive	Gameplay is commensurate with premise—i.e. stinky.	2
Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance	Snowblind	Interplay	Nothing new, but gorgeous to behold.	7
Barbie Horse Adventures: Wild Horse Rescue	Blitz Games	Blitz Games	*XBN*'s pick for Game of the Year. Just kidding.	6
Batman: Dark Tomorrow	Kemco	Kemco	Crap!	2
Batman: The Rise of Sin Tzu	Ubisoft	Ubisoft	Odious time limits detract from a pleasant brawler.	7
Batman: Vengeance	Ubisoft Montreal	Ubisoft	Better than most licensed superhero games.	5
Battle Engine Aquila	Lost Toys	Infogrames	Good game, but lickable interface not included.	7
Big Mutha Truckers	Eutechnyx	Empire Interactive	Driving an 18-wheeler is pretty fun, but not here.	3
Bionicle	Argonaut	EA	Sequel to last year's sleeper hit *Uniocle*. Ha!	6
Blackstone: Magic and Steel	Xpec	Xicat Interactive	Gaun*tlet* called. They want their game back.	3
Blinx: The Time Sweeper	Artoon	Microsoft	Time limits make *Blinx* a bummer, despite innovative premise.	6
Blood Omen 2	Crystal Dynamics	Eidos	Suck up some airborne hemoglobin.	7
BloodRayne	Terminal Reality	Majesco	Ms. Rayne is the highlight—and it's all downhill from there.	6
Blood Wake	Stormfront Studioa	Microsoft	Nautical naughtiness à la Gilbert and Sullivan.	6
Bloody Roar Extreme	Eighting	Konami	Monster/brawler fiends should rent. Do not own.	5
BMX XXX	Z-Axis	Acclaim	Badly drawn naked ladies saying shit.	4
Bond: Agent Under Fire	Electronic Arts	Electronic Arts	If you're stuck with this one, at least you can install Linux.	4
Bruce Lee: Quest of the Dragon	Ronin	Universal Interactive	Not one, but two albatrosses. And a bowler.	2
Brute Force	Digital Anvil	Microsoft	Painfully underwhelming, and definitely not *Halo*.	6
Buffy the Vampire Slayer	The Collective	Electronic Arts	Solid. Eapecially if you're a Buffy fan.	8
Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds	Eurocom	Vivendi Universal	Hampered, oddly enough, by extra playable characters.	6
Burnout	Criterion	Acclaim	If you're itching to put a dollar amount on all that damage.	7
Cabela's Deer Hunt: 2004 Season	Fun Labs	Activision	Deer just *hate* being set on easy mode.	5
Capcom vs. SNK: EO	Capcom	Capcom	Sweet but plagued by network lag, online play can be a drag.	8
Cel Damage	Pseudo Interactive	Electronic Arts	Wacky cel-shaded vehicular combat.	5
Chase: Hollywood Stunt Drivar	I-Imagine	Bam!	Interesting idea, flawed execution.	6
Circus Maximus: Chariot Wars	Kodiak	Encore	You'd think racing a chariot would be more fun.	5
Colin McRae Rally 3	Codemasters	Codemasters	Rally excellence with faithful damaga.	8
Commandos 2: Men of Courage	Pyro	Eidos	More Gordian than rocket science, but oddly compelling.	7
Conflict: Desert Storm	SCI Gamas/Pivotal	Gotham Games	Bad taste in spades from the U.K.	5
Crash Bandicoot: The Wrath of Cortex	Traveller's Tales	Universal Interactive	All stuff you've seen before, but done pretty well.	6
Crash Nitro Kart	Vicarious Visions	Universal	The goofy kart thing is wearing thin, Crash.	5
Crazy Taxi 3: High Roller	Sega	Acclaim	Ugh. What a soundtrack. Still fun, however.	6
Crimson Sea	Koei	Koei	Make Mutton-chops while performing a variety of tasks.	8
Crimson Skies: High Road to Revenge	FASA Studios	Microsoft	Being a skygofer was never this much fun.	8
D&D Heroes	MicroProse	Atari	Online brethren around the corner. Don't bother with this.	5
Dark Angel	Radical Entertainment	Sierra/Fox Interactive	Adaptation of the TV show. Also: terrible.	2

Dark Summit	Radical Entertainment	THQ	A rocky intro to the skier's illuminati.	5
Deve Mirra 2	Z-Axis	Acclaim	Lots of trick combos and riders, but flawed.	5
Devid Beckham Soccer	Rage Software	Majesco	If it's British, doesn't that meke it football?	4
Deed or Alive 3	Team Ninja	Tecmo	Disappointing despite copious bounce.	7
Dead or Alive: Xtreme Beach Volleyball	Tecmo	Tecmo	We bought it for the articles.	7
Deed to Rights	Namco	Namco	Looking for *Max* Payne redux? Lucky you.	4
Deathrow	Southend	Ubisoft	Futuristic, televised sports game? How quaint.	6
Defender	Seven Studios	Midway	Framerate and control problems.	5
Dino Crisis 3	Capcom	Capcom	The equivalent of a digital lemon.	5
Dinotopia: The Sunstone Odyssey	Vicious Cycle	TDK Mediactive	Boring world, whiny protagonists.	3
Disney's Extreme Skate Adventure	Toys for Bob	Activision	Solid, but might be too tough for the wee ones.	7
Dr. Muto	Midway	Midway	Rent if you have to, but not otherwise.	4
Dragon's Lair 3D: Return to the Lair	DragonStone	Ubisoft	We're still waiting for the Fritz the Cat game.	7
Drake	Idol FX	Majesco	Camera is ass, "oni demons" is redundant.	3
Dynasty Warriors 3	Koei	Koei	Historical slaughter with huge armies.	8
Dynasty Warriors 4	Koei	Koei	More historical and overwhelming, but tough on the X button.	8
Eggmania: Eggstreme Madness	Hot Gen Studios	Kemco	Keep it around for pint-sized visitors.	5
Elder Scrolls 3: Morrowind	Bethesda Softworks	Bethesda Softworks	Enormous environments, but wheck cherecter modeling.	8
Encleve	Starbreeze Studios	Conspiracy Games	No midlevel seve points. Rushed.	5
ESPN College Hoops	Visual Concepts	Sega	Xbox-powered air hockey with some basketball thrown in.	6
ESPN MLS Extreme 2002	Konami	Konami	Almost unplayable.	4
ESPN NBA 2004	Visual Concepts	Sega	Compared with *NBA Live*, it's just all right.	7
ESPN NBA 2Night	Konami	Konami	You have more options—best exercise them.	5
ESPN NFL Football	Visual Concepts	Sega	Xbox's best online football game.	8
ESPN NFL Primetime	Konami	Konami	Four years ago, *Primetime* might have been a contender.	3
ESPN NHL Hockey	Visual Concepts	Sega	If you're wanting to play online, this is it.	8
ESPN Winter X-Games Snowboarding 2002	Konami	Konami	Tricks look cool. Good luck trying to pull them off.	4
Evil Deed: Fistful of Boomstick	Vis Interactive	THQ	Not even Bruce Campbell himself can redeem FOB.	3
Fairly OddParents: Breakin' Da Rules	Blitz Games	THQ	Endearing, but self-referential. Dave Eggers would be proud.	6
Fatal Frame	Tecmo	Tecmo	More terrifying than *Resident Evil*, more creepy than *Silent Hill*.	6
FIFA World Cup 2002	EA Sports	Electronic Arts Canada	Pretty pared down, but retains the fun.	7
FIFA Soccer 2003	EA Sports	EA Sports	No training mode or online, but otherwise solid.	8
FIFA Soccer 2004	EA Canada	Electronic Arts	Electronic Arts finally gets soccer right. Excellent.	9
Finding Nemo	Traveller's Tales	THQ	Another good one for underage visitors.	6
Fireblade	Kuju	Midway	Like we need more implausible anti-terrorist propaganda.	6
Freeky Flyers	Midway	Midway	You're permanently handicapped in this one.	4
Freedom Fighters	Io Interactive	EA	Could do with less fighting, more freedom.	7
Freestyle Metal X	Dabius Studios	Midway	Motorhead must be really hard up.	4
Frogger Beyond	Konami	Konami	There is no money left to be made on *Frogger*.	4
Furious Karting	Babylon	Atari	Inexplicable karma system is weird. Furiously weird!	5
Fusion Frenzy	Blitz Games	Microsoft	A decent party game with a few flaws.	6
Futurama	UDS	Vivendi Universal	All variations on one theme: uninspired gameplay.	5
Gauntlet: Dark Legacy	Midway	Midway	Flawed and shallow, but who's complaining? We are.	6
Gladiator: Sword of Vengeance	Acclaim Studios	Acclaim	Arbitrary and invisible save points mean more mashing.	4
Gladius	LucasArts	LucasArts	Not the prettiest turn-based strategizer we've ever seen.	7
Goblin Commander: Unleash the Horde	Jaleco	Jaleco	Get WarCraft-y without too much cerebral strain.	7
Godzilla: Destroy All Monsters Melee	Pipeworks	Atari	Quite possibly made out of antifun.	4
Grabbed by the Ghoulies	Rare	Microsoft	Monster combat for the lazy and easily distracted.	4
Great Escape	Pivotal Games	Gotham Games	Too much *Hogan's Heroes*, not enough *Call of Duty*.	5
Grooverider: Slot Car Thunder	King of the Jungle	Encore	Everything about it screams budget. Not horrible, though.	6
Group-S Challenge	Capcom	Capcom	Can't decide between hardcore sim or arcade fluff.	4
Gun Metal	Rage Software	Majesco	Mech game sans whiz and bang.	5
Gunvalkyrie	Smilebit	Sega	Blast indigenous evildoers in huge outdoor environments.	6

Enter the Matrix
DEV. Shiny
PUB. Atari

One of the most eagerly anticipated games in recent memory turns out to be significantly worse than mediocre. Take the blue pill.

XBN Rating: **3**

Burnout 2: Point of Impact
DEV. Criterion
PUB. Acclaim

Along with EA's *Need for Speed Underground*, this is some of the finest arcade-style racing available anywhere. So...damn...fast.

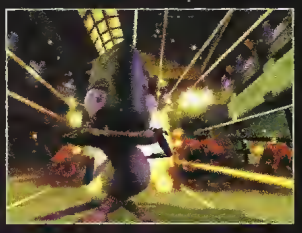
XBN Rating: **9**

Genma Onimusha
DEV. Capcom
PUB. Capcom

Old-school control and play mechanics (think *Resident Evil*), but beautiful visuals and great atmosphere make it worthwhile.

XBN Rating: **7**

XTRA
Out of the Box



Munch's Oddysee
DEV. Oddworld Inhabitants
PUB. Microsoft

It's a gloriously odd world after all, as a gimp and a simp throw down against the Glukkons. One of the more offbeat Xbox titles, certainly.

XBN Rating: **8**

Battle Engine Aquila
DEV. Lost Toys
PUB. Infogrames

Pilot a finely tuned killing machine in this sweeping, first-person war simulation with huge battles and multiple objectives. Very solid.

XBN Rating: **7**

Panzer Dragoon Orta
DEV. Smilebit
PUB. Sega

Yes, you're on rails, but they branch. You can find it for like $7 at Target, so pick it up! Visual poetry in motion.

XBN Rating: **9**

GAME	DEV.	PUB.	COMMENTS	XBN RATING
Halo	Bungie	Microsoft	Rad sucks. Blua rulas.	10
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets	Eurocom/EA UK	EA Games	Faithful, it briet, Zelda-inspired interpratation.	7
Haunted Manaion	High Voltage	TDK Mediactiva	Zake playa ghoat janitor daapita iffy camera and targeting.	7
High Haat MLB 2004	3DO	3DO	Could usa tiner pitch control. And batter graphics.	8
Hitman 2: Silent Assaaain	Io Intaractiva	Eidoa	Small tlawa don't hinder anjoyable aasassination.	8
House of tha Dead III	Wow	Saga	Comaa with its own praquel, but you'd battar bring a lightgun.	7
Hulk	Radical	Vivendi Univarsal	Not as tarribla aa it could have been.	6
Huntar: the Reckoning	Digital Mayham	Interplay	It's you against a lot of zombias. Hope you brought tons of ammo.	8
Hunter: The Reckoning: Redeemer	High Voltage	Vivandi Univarsal	Juat lika *Gauntlet*, only lasa innovativa. Play with friands.	6
Indiana Jones and the Emperor's Tomb	The Collactiva	LucaaArts	Pretty linear tomb raiding. Could be woraa.	7
IndyCar Sariaa	Brain in a Jar	Codemaaters	Great gamaplay with iffy sound and graphica.	7
Inside Pitch 2003	Microaoft	Microsoft	The worst Xbox basaball gama thare is.	3
Jamas Bond: Nightfire	EA Gamaa	Eurocomm	Standalona Bond epiaode that would banafit from online play.	8
Jedi Knight 2: Jedi Outcast	Raven	LucasArts	Lightsaber combat badavils Kyla Katarn yat again.	7
Jadi Starfighter	Secret Leval	LucasArts	All kinda ot airborna combat— now with addad Forca!	7
Jat Sat Radio Futura	Smilebit	Saga	Tag, grind, and trick yourselt silly. All whila cal-shaded.	8
Juraaaic Park: Operation Ganeaia	Univarsal	Vivandi	*Zoo Tycoon* this ain't. No mouaa, for one.	6
Kabuki Warriors	Lightweight	Crave	*Bushido Blada* davalopers hava bad days too, you know.	2
Kakuto Chojin	Dream Factory	Microsoft	Microsoft Japan'a attempt at high-concept anti-art.	3
Kelly Slater's Pro Surfer	Treyarch	Activision	We suapact surfing is more fun in real life.	5
kill.awitch	Namco	Namco Homatak	An unapologatic, slick shoot-am-up.	8
Knockout Kings 2002	Black Ops	Elactronic Arts	From sim to button mashar. Could be worsa, we suppoaa.	6
Kung Fu Chaos	Juat Add Monstars	Microaoft	A momantarily aatiafying, paintully diapoaabla axparianca.	5
Lagenda of Wreatling	Acclaim	Acclaim	This is aa good aa wrestling gata on the Xbox.	6
Laganda ot Wreatling II	Acclaim	Acclaim	There ia no canvaa. Thare ia only toilat.	4
Links 2004	Microsoft	Microsoft	Online play and realiam naad no license.	8
Loona: Tha Fight tor Fame	Warthog	Infogramas	Poorly exacutad with idantical charactars.	3
Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers	EA/Stormfront	EA	See? Sometimaa licanaed gamas are good!	8
Lord of the Rings: Return of the King	EA	EA	Sea? Somatimaa licanaed gamas are good twice!	9
Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring	WXP	Univarsal	Wa have had more pieaaurabla root canals.	2
Maca Griffin: Bounty Hunter	Warthog	Vivandi Universal	If you lika dumb A.I., this one's for you.	5
Mad Dash Racing	Crystal Dynamics	Eidoa	Racing on foot. Don't ba faoled.	2
Madden 2004	Tiburon	EA Sports	Unparallalad, unlaaa you like to play online.	9
Madden NFL 2003	Tiburon	EA Sports	You naadad thia laat year.	9
Maddan 2002	Electronic Arts	Elactronic Arts	Depth interferea with gamaplay.	7
Marvel vs. Capcom 2	Capcom	Capcom	A coupla years too lata.	3
Matt Hoffman'a Pro BMX 2	Rainbow Studios	Activlaion	Matt Hoffman kicks butt.	7
Max Payne	Remady Ent./NEO	Rockatar	Bullet time your way to auccaas amid urban grit.	8
MachAasault	Day 1 Studios	Microaoft	Talk amack but not atrategy on your headset.	7
Medal of Honor: Frontline	Dreamworks Int.	EA Gamaa	Missions and A.I. could use aoma work. Slick axtarior, though.	7
Matal Arms: Glitch in the Syatem	Swingin' Ape Studioa	Vivendi Univarsal	Kiddy-looking shooter la a slaapar hit.	9
Metal Dungaon	Panther	Xicat Interactiva	Dungeon crawling was navar laaa fun.	4
Metal Gaar Solid 2: Substanca	Konami	Konami	Every posaibla permutation of *MGS2*, axcept for skataboarding.	9
Midnight Club II	Rockatar San Diago	Rockstar Gamea	Don't bother coming in aecond.	8
Midtown Madness 3	Dice	Microsoft	Drive lika a nut. Better onlina.	7
Mika Tyaon Heavyweight Boxing	Atomic Planat	Codemasters	Not much Mika in hare—mayba that'a all right after all.	4
Minority Report	Trayarch	Activlsion	Dreary anvironmants and repatitiva gameplay.	5
MLB Slugfast 20-03	Midway	Midway	Will drive the lavelhaadad to the brink of insanity.	5
MLB Slugtast 20-04	Point of Viaw	Midway	Bast aavored with the voluma at zero. Or lowar.	4
Mojo!	Crave Entartainmant	Crave Entartainment	Thare is much cauas for boredom.	3
Mortal Kombat: Daadly Allianca	Midway	Midway	Spectacular gore as alwaya, but gamaplay suffers.	8
Moto GP	Climax	THQ	Bump maps can shake your tilings loose.	8

MotoGP 2	Climax	THQ	The *Gran Turismo* of two-wheeled racing.	8
Motor Trend Lotus Challenge	Kuju	Xicat Interactive	Mediocre is too charitable.	3
Murakumo: Renegade Mech Pursuit	From Software	Ubisoft	Don't judge a game by its opening FMV.	5
MVP Baseball	Electronic Arts	Electronic Arts	Mo Vaughn gets a makeover.	7
MX 2002 Featuring Ricky Carmichael	Pacific Coast Power & Light	THQ	So-so extreme motocross action.	6
MX Superfly	Pacific	THQ	Weird saving mechanics, unpredictable physics.	4
Myst III: Exile	Presto Studios	Ubisoft	May have been fun on a computer. Who knows?	4
Nascar Heat	MGI	Infogrames	Nate Denver is a comedic genius.	5
NASCAR Thunder 2004	Electronic Arts	Electronic Arts	Grudge-holding thugs make fun of your mullet.	9
NASCAR Thunder 2002	Electronic Arts	Electronic Arts	Competent but uninspired. Real-time damage, however.	6
NBA 2K3	Visual Concepts	Sega Sports	Specular highlights shine in this Xbox Live-enabled iteration.	8
NBA 2K2	Visual Concepts	Sega	Improved ball-handling, controls, and faithful detail.	9
NBA Inside Drive 2004	High Voltage	Microsoft	Dynasty mode doesn't make up for lousy gameplay.	6
NBA Inside Drive 2003	High Voltage	Microsoft	Forget about franchise and fantasy modes.	6
NBA Jam	Acclaim	Acclaim	Cop *NBA Street, Vol. 2* instead.	8
NBA Live 2004	Electronic Arts	Electronic Arts	No online (still), but everything else is darn near perfect.	9
NBA Live 2003	Electronic Arts	Electronic Arts	No online, but flashy moves and fewer quirks.	7
NBA Live 2002	Electronic Arts	Electronic Arts	A faithful rendering of a basketball game.	9
NBA Starting Five	Konami	Konami	Good gameplay with the ugliest faces ever.	5
NBA Street Vol. 2	EA Vancouver	EA	You want this. Best enjoyed with friends.	9
NCAA College Football 2K3	Visual Concepts	Sega	Lots of eye candy, but the gameplay's a bit lacking.	7
NCAA College Basketball 2K3	Visual Concepts	Sega Sports	Best (read: only) college hoops game for Xbox in 2002.	7
NCAA Football 2004	Electronic Arts	Electronic Arts	Create-a-School feature rocks. No Live support.	8
NCAA Football 2003	Electronic Arts	Electronic Arts	The college football game of the year.	8
NCAA March Madness 2004	Electronic Arts	Electronic Arts	Over-the-top gameplay is no excuse for shallowness.	5
Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit 2	Electronic Arts	Electronic Arts	No analog support for acceleration = bummer.	7
Need for Speed Underground	Electronic Arts	Black Box	Trick out your virtual ride in any number of ways.	9
New Legends	Infinite Machine	THQ	Graceful fighting, but that's about it.	5
NFL 2K3	Visual Concepts	Sega	More realism from the studs at Sega.	9
NFL 2K2	Sega Sports	Sega	Improved A.I. and animations bring it up to speed.	9
NFL Fever 2004	Microsoft	Microsoft	A distant third on the gridiron.	6
NFL Blitz 20-03	Midway	Midway	Yet even still more blitz.	6
NFL Blitz 20-02	Point of View	Midway	Midway's annual contribution to digital football.	7
NFL Fever 2003	Microsoft	Microsoft	Great modeling, lousy commentary, cool modes.	8
NFL Fever	Microsoft	Microsoft	Pretty good...for the new guy.	8
NHL 2003	Electronic Arts	Electronic Arts	Good for fans of the series. Others stay away.	7
NHL 2004	Electronic Arts	Electronic Arts	Edges out Sega's *ESPN NHL Hockey*, but no online.	8
NHL 2002	Electronic Arts	Electronic Arts	Swankiness on sketee, and arcadey too.	8
NHL Hitz 20-03	Midway	Midway	Good fun if you don't have the previous one.	7
NHL Hitz 2002	Black Box	Midway	Ham-fisted, brutal pyrotechnics.	6
NHL Hitz Pro	Next Level Games	Midway	Lack of online support is a drag.	8
Nickelodeon Party Blast	Data Design	Infogrames	Slow, myopic camera, repetitive. Ugh.	2
Nightcaster II: Equinox	Jaleco	Jaleco	Only marginally better than *Nightcaster I*.	5
Nightcaster: Defeat the Darkness	VR1 Entertainment	Microsoft	Dreary environments and endless monsters.	4
Outlaw Golf	Hypnotix	Simon & Schuster	Golf as it was meant to be played. With strippers.	7
Outlaw Volleyball	Simon and Schuster	Hypnotix	Deviants playing volleyball. Nothing special, move along.	5
Pac-Man World 2	Namco	Namco	Mr. Man is reduced to biting moves from Crash.	5
Phantasy Star Online	Sonic Team	Sega	Best experienced online, if a spendy proposition.	8
Phantom Crash	Genki	Phantagram Interactive	Customizability out the tailpipe, but few arena selections.	8
Pirates of the Caribbean	Akella	Bethesda	A stunningly bug-riddled beta release.	2
Pirates: The Legend of Black Kat	Westwood	Electronic Arts	Keep this one around for Talk Like a Pirate Day. Otherwise, forget it.	5
Prisoner of War	Wide Games	Codemasters	Escape from Nazis. Five times.	7
Pro Cast Sports Fishing Game	Capcom	Capcom	Seemingly devoid of aquatic life.	4

Otogi
DEV. From Software
PUB. Sega

Easily one of the most entertaining (and overlooked) games in recent memory. Play this now so that you're prepared for the sequel.

XBN Rating: **8**

XIII
DEV. Ubisoft
PUB. Ubisoft

Beautiful comic-book-informed visuals, a great premise, and style to spare. Better gameplay mechanics would have sealed the deal.

XBN Rating: **6**

Medal of Honor: Rising Sun
DEV. EA LA
PUB. EA

Pretty backdrops compromised by insultingly dumb A.I. and missions. Instead of deep, intense drama, this is *Doom* in the South Pacific.

XBN Rating: **4**

XTRA
Out of the Box

Sega GT Online
DEV. WOW Entertainment
PUB. Sega

Sega and Xbox's answer to the *Gran Turismo* series goes online. At $20, it's a must-have for gearheads with a hankering for Xbox Live.

XBN Rating: **9**

Sneakers
DEV. Media Vision
PUB. Microsoft

Remember that time you got hit by a bus and somehow lived? And then you went back to get your hat, only to get hit by another bus?

XBN Rating: **3**

Rallisport Challenge
DEV. Digital Illusions
PUB. Microsoft

With the sequel just around the corner, *XBN* returns to the original and finds that it holds up remarkably well. Makes rally racing pretty.

XBN Rating: **8**

GAME	DEV.	PUB.	COMMENTS	XBN RATING
Pro Racs Drivar	Codamastars	Codamaatars	You're Ryan, and tha damaga ia real.	7
Project Gotham Recing	Bizarre Creationa	Microaoft	Smooth control and fun to boot.	8
Pulsa Racar	Jalaco	Jalaco	Unholy miaceganation of kart and *WipEout*.	2
Quantum Redshift	Curly Monstars	Microaoft	Designer's Republic conspicuously absent, but solid hovering action.	6
Rally Fualon	Climax	Activialon	Create nuclaar anargy whila rally racing.	5
Rayman 3: Hoodlum Havoc	Ublaoft	Ubisoft	Gorgaous scanary trampled by tadium.	6
Rayman Arana	Ubisoft	Ubisoft	Rant. With booza.	5
Red Faction II	Volition	THQ	A linaar on-rails twitchfast.	4
Redcard Soccar 20-03	Midway	Midway	Sports gamaa need to catch on fire more oftan.	5
Raign of Fira	Bam!	Kuju	Anothar licansad disastar with unbalanca galore.	4
Rant-a-Haro No. 1	Sega	AIA USA	Sega's unchangad port of ita Dreamcast game.	4
Return to Castle Wolfenstein: Tides of War	id/Narve Software	Activision	Are wa sura playing as a Nazi onlina is a good idsa?	8
RoadKill	Terminal Reality	Midway	Derivativa, sure—but filthy, gratifying darivativa.	6
RoboCop	Titus	Titus	Battar you ahould go outsida and play.	3
Robotach: Battlacry	Vicious Cycla	TDK	So pretty. Other than looks, thare's not much thara, though.	6
Rocky	Raga	Ubiaoft	Doaa not auck. Big-hair moda anablad.	7
Rogua Ops	Bita Studio	Kemco	*Splintor Gsar Solid* this ain't.	5
Rollarcoaatar Tycoon	Chris Sawyar	Infogrsmas	$30 for a 4-yaar-old gama? Huh.	6
Run Lika Hall	Digital Mayham	Intarplay	Featuring actual charactar davalopmant!	7
Scooby-Doo! Night of 100 Frights	Haavy Iron Studioa	THQ	Competent, but not innovativa.	5
SeaBlada	VisionScapa	Simon and Schuatar	Rottan controla, rotten premisa, atc.	2
Sega GT 2002	WOW Entartainmant	Sega	Lots of trecka, tons of cars, accuracy galora.	8
Sega Soccar Slam	Black Box	Sega	Ws guaas fire is cool.	2
Sorioua Sam	Crotaam	Gotham Gamas	Fun Croatian FPS, but you've playad battar.	5
Shanmua II	Saga/AM2	Microaoft	Perhaps a bit too verbosa, but angaging nonathsleaa.	7
Shrek	Dico	Droamworka	Packad with polygons, but vary rough gamaplay.	6
Shrek Super Party	Mass Media	TDK Modiactive	Only marginally batter than *Nickalodoon Party Blast*.	3
Silant Hill 2	Konami	Konami	Walcome back to unrapantant creap-out city.	8
Simpsons Road Rage	Radical Entartainmant	Elactronic Arts	*Crazy Taxi* with Matt Groaning'a licanaad blaaaing.	4
Smaahing Driva	Gaaico S.A.	Namco	Racing taxia? Why not? Oh.	3
Soldiar of Fortuna II: Doubla Halix	Gratuitoua Gamas	Activision	This ia as stock and unintaresting as it gets.	4
Soul Calibur II	Namco	Namco	Amazing, but Saung Mina raally ought to ba initially aalactabla.	9
Spaad Kinga 2	Climax	Acclaim	It'a craahtastic, but *MotoGP 2*'s bottar.	5
Spidar-Man	Treyarch	Activialon	Asida from the jarky camara, this ona camo out pretty good.	7
Splashdown	Rainbow Studios	Infogramaa	Gorgaously rendarad watar, if you can baliavs that.	7
SpongaBob SquarePants	Haavy Iron Studios	THQ	Insart licansad charactar A into competant gama B.	5
SpyHuntar	Point of Viaw	Midway	Soma gamaa should remain romanticizad in mamory.	5
SSX 3	EA Big	Elactronic Arts	Onlinalaas but ovarything olaa is sick.	9
SSX Tricky	EA Canada	Elactronic Arts	Tha premiar glitzfaat of a snowboardar.	8
Staka	Gamanaas	Motro 3D	Sorry, nothing nica to aay.	2
Star Trek: Shattsrad Universa	Starsphara	TDK Madiactive	Only buy this if you're a Klingon-spaaking complatist.	3
Star Wars Obi-Wan	LucasArts	LucasArts	Obi-Wan kicks soma ass. That's it, really.	5
Star Wars Starfighter	Secret Laval	LucaaArts	Bogua handling with aparse anamy variaty.	5
Star Wars: Tha Clona Wars	LucasArts	Pandamic	You could play by yoursalf, but you probably don't want to.	6
Starsky & Hutch	Minda Eye Productions	Empire Interactiva	Whaal and lightgun support ia cool, but not enough.	4
Stata of Emsrgancy	Vis	Rockatar Gamas	Rockstar's littla game that couldn't.	6
Staal Battalion	Capcom	Capcom	Kaap a fingar naar that siact button on your $200(!) controllar.	10
Straat Hoops	Black Ops	Activision	Streat oops, more like. Vary lacklustar.	3
Supar Bubbla Pop	Runa Craft	Jalaco	Lika Bust-A-Mova in 3D, but sucky.	3
Suparman: Tha Man of Staal	Circus Fraak	Atari/Infogramas	Fight firas and kill dumb robots. A lot.	4
SWAT: Global Strika Taam	Argonaut Gamas	Vivondi	Voica recognition can't halp this tactical blundar.	5
SX Superstar	Climax	AKA Acclaim	Faxes aran't very axciting in 2003.	5

GAME	DEV.	PUB.	COMMENTS	XBN RATING
Syberie	Microids	XS Gemes	Undertested pert ef the Windews geme.	4
Tae Feng: Fist ef the Letus	Studie Gigents	Microseft	Anether celossal misstep in Microseft's first-perty lineup.	3
Taz: Wented	Blitz Gemes	Infogrames	A little tee liberal in its repetitien ef seunds.	7
Teenege Mutant Ninja Turtles	Kenemi	Konami	Surprisingly geod, but nething new here.	6
Tennis Masters Series 2003	Microids	Hip Interective	Austere end similke with no music end ne unseemly grunts.	S
Terminetor: Dawn of Fate	Peredigm Ent.	Infegrames	Hoe boy. At least he'e net governer...oh men.	2
Test Drive	Pitbull Syndicate	Infogramee/Atari	Strictly e weekend rental, if thet.	S
Test Drive Off-Read	Angel Studios	Infegramee	Better leoking then its reletives, but just es dull.	4
Tetris Werlds	Radical Entertainment	THQ	Just whet the werld needs.	4
Tetris Worlds Online	Radical Entertainment	THQ	*Tetris*. Online.	6
The Italian Job	Climax	Eides	Mini Ceeper recing with ne mep.	4
The Simpsens: Hit and Run	Redicel Entertainment	Vivendi Univereal	Check full of inside jekes.	8
The Sims	Maxis/Edge	EA Games	A pert ef the beet-selling computer geme.	8
The Thing	Computer Artworks	Black Label	Geod leeking but team killers are s drag.	7
Tiger Weeds PGA Tour 2004	Electronic Arts	Electronic Arts	Magic geifing clethes improve yeur ebilities.	8
Tiger Weods PGA Teur 2003	Electronic Arts	Elcctronic Arts	Gentle leerning curve with werthwhile unlockables.	8
Tem Clency's Gheet Recen	Red Sterm	Ubiseft	Shines in enline play, but single pleyer ceuld be improved.	8
Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Island Thunder	Rcd Storm	Ubisoft	The $29 is worth it.	7
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell	Ubisoft Montresl	Ubisoft	A gergeeus reinterpretetlen ef steelth-actien geming.	8
Tony Hawk's Pre Sketer 4	Neversoft	Activision	No online for Tony, but still a geed session.	7
Tony Hewk'e Pro Sketer 3	Neverseft	Activisien	Great centrols end e bunch of new features.	8
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2	Neverseft/Treyerch	Activision	Is 50 clams werth en X? It's *THPS2* mede shiny.	6
Tep Spin	Pewer end Megic	Microsoft	Deubles on Xbex Live is new possible.	9
Total Immersien Recing	Razerworks	Empire Interactive	Could usc e few mere trecks, but goed fer gearheads.	S
Tetaled!	Rsge Seftwere	Majesco	Involves crashing a lot of cars. Or eomething.	4
Toxic Grind	Blue Shift	THQ	Terrible stery end underwster control.	2
TrensWerld Snewboerding	Heusemerque	Infegrames	Hit-er-miss graphics end opeque trick scheme.	6
TransWerld Surf	Atari/Angel Studios	Infogrames	Lackluater surf. Play *WipEeut* insteed.	3
Triple Play 2002	Pandemic Studios	Electronic Arts	Ugly end irritating with inane cemmentary.	6
Turok: Evelutien	Acclaim	Acclaim	Turok can't keep up with the new FPS kids.	S
Ty the Tesmanian Tiger	Krome	Electronic Arts	Motien-sickness-inducing camera is ne fun.	4
UFC Tepeut	Dreem Factery	Crave	Pert wrestler, psrt fighter. Dees neither perticularly well.	S
UFC Tapout 2	Dream Factery	TDK Mediective	Lose quickly te pseudonymed UFC lumineries.	5
Unreel Championship	Digital Extremes	Atari	Good end violent fun, but this port needs mere pelish.	7
Vcxx	Accleim	Accleim	Übercute meets enetomicelly faithful rendering.	S
Voedoo Vince	Beep Industries	Microsoft	Won't be Microsoft'e meecot enytime soon.	5
Wakebeerding Unleeshed	Shebe Studios	Activision	Extreme eperts returns to run-based levels—but it's geed.	7
Wellace & Gromit in Project Zee	Frontier Develepments	Bem!	Limey cuteainess and helf-eased centrels.	S
Whecked!	Preste Studies	Microsoft	Game shew gene wrong, indeed.	4
Whiteout	Vicarious Visions	Kenami	Snowmebile racing deserves better.	4
World Recing	Synetic	TDK Mediective	Benz recing egeinst other suburben drivers.	4
Werld Series Baseball	Blue Shift/Visual Concepts	Sege	Sega's attention to detail becemes ever mere appercnt.	9
Werld Series Besebsll 2K3	Blue Shift	Sege	Exheustive research with flewless rendering.	9
Wreckless	Bunkasha	Activision	Newtonian accuracy and yakuza chesing in a vehicular setting.	8
WTA Werld Tour Tennis	Konemi	Konemi	Den't get yeur hepes up—ne Keurnikove, ne Venus.	4
WWE Rew 2	Anchor	THQ	Rew ee in half-beked, or if yeu prefer, lame.	4
WWF Raw	Anchor	THQ	Plegued by miebehaving cemeras end ether curious cheices.	S
X-Men: Next Dimension	Paradox	Activision	A black merk en the name ef the X-Men.	3
X2: Welverine's Revenge	Gonepool	Activisien	Stery and steelth prevent undue suckege.	S
XGRA	Acclaim Cheltenhem	Acclaim	Remember *WipEeut*? Thet game wes rad.	S
XIII	Ubiseft	Ubiseft	Swenk cel-sheding end Adem West, but flewed.	6
Zepper	Blitz Games	Infogremes	Scett Bale + *Freggcr* = not much fun.	4

ToeJam & Earl III: Mission to Earth
DEV. Visual Concepts
PUB. Sega

Funkotronians ToeJam, Earl, and new character Latisha storm Earth for a brilliantly colorful and joyously wacky 3D adventure. Rock on.

XBN Rating: **7**

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic
DEV. BioWare
PUB. Microsoft

An epic RPG wherein players can create their own hero and make real moral choices that directly influence the story. Excellent.

XBN Rating: **7**

TimeSplitters 2
DEV. Free Radical
PUB. Eidos

The single-player game is somewhat of a letdown, but this is easily one of the finest offline multiplayer FPS available on Xbox.

XBN Rating: **8**

PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 2

A short crash course (in not crashing)

Lie down, relax, grab a beer/nonalcoholic beverage, unbutton your pants, and welcome yourself to the all-new, all-useful trickery section. Each month, we'll prepare a feast of cunning strategy, amusing codes, and bizarre revelations for the finest Xbox software. This time, we offer a veritable omelet of Easter eggs in *Deus Ex: Invisible War*, kick *Project Gotham Racing 2*'s tires, and drop some code-based knowledge for a host of big sports titles. Compiled by David S. J. Hodgson

Produced in association with the good folks over at Prima Games. Prima's official *Deus Ex: Invisible War* and *Project Gotham Racing 2* strategy guides are on sale now.

PRIMA GAMES

Find the Line

Avoid unnecessary directional changes. Look for a path through broader curves that minimizes steering. Turning creates additional friction and weight-distribution changes that can slow your car down, or worse, spin it out. So cut across corners, not around them.

Braking

Good braking technique can be just as important as quick acceleration. Learning to accept that you have to slow down sometimes to drive well is an important first step. Feathering the brake when entering a turn settles your car gently to a more manageable speed and conserves your energy when exiting. Braking hard puts you into a harsh slide that can be either useful or detrimental in different situations. Learn which turns need to be taken in which way to maximize your score and minimize lap times.

Lay off the accelerator just before you enter a turn such as this one.

Mr. Midlife Crisis shows off his Corvette.

Drifting Away

Incredibly important to the game, drifting (how much the car tends to slide away from your normal driving line as you make a turn) is controlled by using the steering wheel, accelerator, and brake to wrench your car about in one of the following four ways.

1. Power Drifting

Also known as "power sliding," this method is similar to passive drifting through tighter turns, but it uses the accelerator to break the rear-tire traction. Lay off the gas before you enter the curve. Just after turning, accelerate hard to spin the back wheels and drive the back end of the car outward. Once the car is pointing in the right direction, meter your gas-pedal pressure to regain control of the back end. This technique is normally reserved for those faster, high-horsepower vehicles you find later in the game, like this black monstrosity below.

Power drifting is mainly for use with the higher-end, high-horsepower vehicles found later in the game.

2. Passive Drifting

Lay off the accelerator just before entering a turn, stay off the gas while steering, then accelerate once you're clear. This affords you a tighter turning radius than accelerating through the curve and gets you through the moderately wide turns without breaking your traction. On tighter turns, use this method to break your rear-wheel grip and kick the back end out a little for a controlled slide. The game refers to this as a slide, and you get a Kudos bonus any time you do one. Simply take turns a little tighter and cut the wheel more sharply to achieve this effect (see left).

3. Standard Drifting

This technique involves no special accelerator or brake work, and the back tires stay planted on the asphalt. Simply steer through a turn and let the car's momentum carry it to the outside of the track (shown by the marks to the left of the car above). This type of drifting is the most desirable because it has a relatively low impact on your speed and direction. But normal drifting requires either a low-curve-entry speed or broad track to accomplish, so it is the least versatile.

4. Brake Drifting

To get through the tightest turns, brake drifting is the only alternative to drastic deceleration, though it too is characterized by speed reduction and a lengthy slide. Enter the curve near the center and jam on the brakes as you cut the wheel hard to the inside; the back end swings out, and you're poised to exit the turn. This works best with cars that have good acceleration.

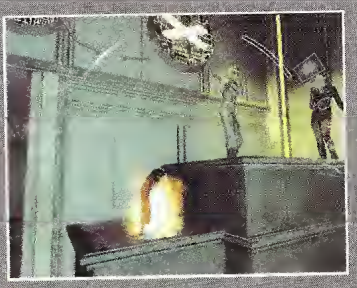
DEUS EX: INVISIBLE WAR

Club Vox: the only place to open your *Deus Ex* Easter egg.

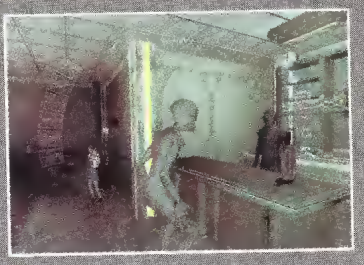
Whoa there, future terrorist hunter. Don't go and finish *Deus Ex: Invisible War* until you've created a separate (and the emphasis here is definitely on the word "separate") save file to check out a just-for-fun surprise the team built into the last mission of the game. Set on the Club Vox map, it's the game's wrap party, where all the different characters in the game get together and shake their collective tail feathers.

WARNING: The trip to the secret party level is one-way—you'll have to reload to a previous save to get back to the real game. So if, for example, you just uploaded the Aquinas Router and you're on your way to the statue to finish your chosen end game, make sure you save your progress if you decide to stop off at the secret party on the way. You can establish a save game once you've made it to the secret party, so you can return there when you want to.

Ya dig?



■ It was, in truth, a really hot party.



■ It was a graveyard smash. With aliens!

■ These floating datacubes contain the infamous *Deus Ex* Quote File. Each one holds a different set of quotes, so collect them all!

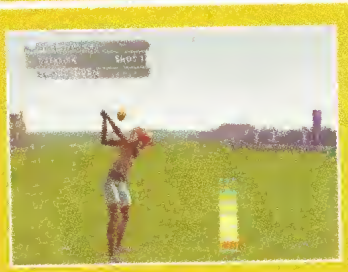
Your name's not down—you're not coming in

How do you get from wannabe chump to party animal? When you enter UNATCO HQ, you'll notice a flag in the first room of the complex. Pick up the flag and carry it to the bathroom that belonged to Joseph Manderley in the first game. Put the flag down inside the bathroom and flush the toilet, and after some cunning warp-tunnel/water-closet teleportation tomfoolery, you'll be instantly transported to the party level. (You won't be able to use weapons, so make sure the path is clear.) You don't have to complete the game before you access the secret level.

■ DJ Ava Johnson is in effect, but party maven Gary Coleman is nowhere to be found.

■ **Deus Ex: The Whole Hog**
In the party level, see if you can find the creature called The Hog and figure out how to end its sad existence. (Hey, we can't give away everything, can we?) And be sure to check out the team credits for an anticlimactic *Thief 3* trailer, both accessible from the Options menu, and both of which run automatically when *Deus Ex: Invisible War* ends.

Code X



■ Tiger Woods, post treatments.

This month, a sports-game triple play, then an avalanche of *Amped 2* codes to kick up more dust than a police raid on Charlie Sheen's house.

Links 2004

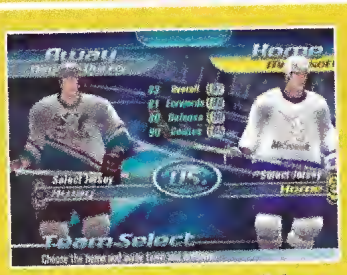
Start your swinging career by creating a character with the most attributes available (80). Type your name in as "SafariTK". Check that Caps Lock is working—this code is case-sensitive! Want to unlock all the courses? Then hold the L and R triggers and press X and Y at the Title screen.

NBA Inside Drive 2004

We're furious. We've uncovered all of this game's codes (entered at the Code menu in Options) but didn't get the classic big-head code. Where's the inflated cranial love, Mr. Gates?

■ I'm the king of the world, ma!

CODE	EFFECT
ARELESS	Accept all trades
BAMBIBOOM	Volleyball
CHALK	8 ball
CHANGEBALL	WNBA ball
CONCERTSPIKE	Beach ball
DIEGO	Soccer ball
DOWNTOWN	Chicago skyline stadium
FUNKY	ABA ball
HOTSAUCE	Max turbo
ICECREAM	Extra players
IMFLYING	Easy alley-oops
MOONCHY	Tiny players
RAINING3S	Easy 3 pointers
UNLIMITED	Unlimited player creation
XSNSPORTS	XBox ball



■ The Microsoft team will own you. Or buy you.

NHL Rivals 2004

Desperate to avoid "the puck stops here" punning, we'll do you the favor of simply stating that this quintet of codes for *Rivals* drums more than a little life into this otherwise humdrum hockey title.

Don't agree with us? Then puck off.

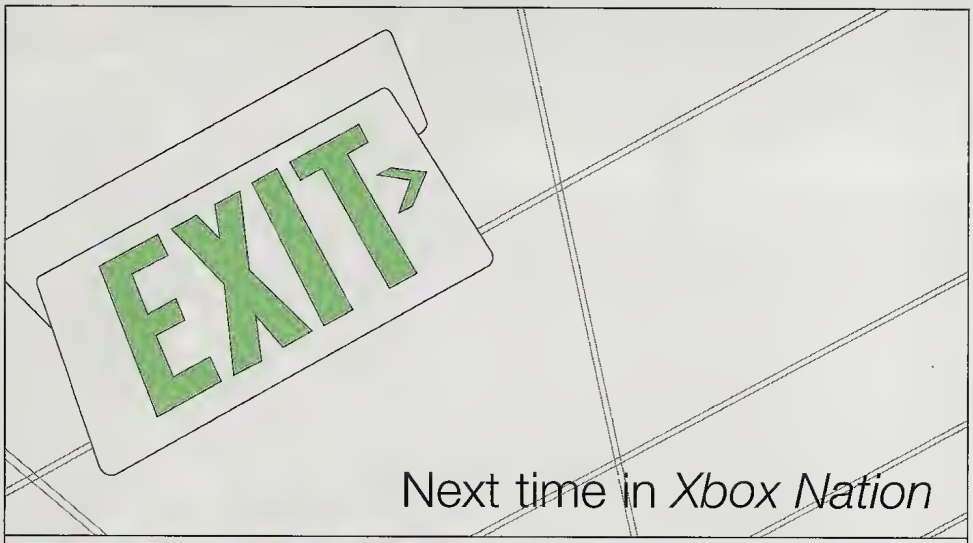
CODE	EFFECT
BLIBBET	Microsoft team
HEAVYPUCK	Increase gravity
HOWITZER	Big shot mode
INVISIBLEMAN	Invisible players
WEIGHTLESSPUCK	Low gravity

Amped 2

Enter these case-sensitive codes in the Cheats menu, in Options. The text box removes the code when you enter it correctly.

■ Fact: Snow is not as delicious as it looks.

CODE	EFFECT
Alice	Courses are extremely icy
AllLevels	All levels available
Bunny	Pink bunny snowboarder outfit
DontCrash	Boarder never crashes
FastMove	Boarder moves quicker
LowGravity	(Wait for it...) Low gravity
MaxSkills	Max out boarder stats
NoCollisions	No collisions
ShowRewards	Unlock all videos
SuperSpin	Spin quicker



Next time in *Xbox Nation*

Splinter Cell 2: Exclusive first review

If stealthiness were legal tender, Sam Fisher would be Donald Trump with a solid gold toilet and a few bucks to spare. Now behold Mr. Fisher's highly anticipated return in *Splinter Cell 2: Pandora Tomorrow*. An online multiplayer stealth-action game? *Xbox Nation*'s official verdict next issue.

Xbox Nation 2

Your friends at *Xbox Nation* pay a visit to the infamous drawing board (what with its flatscreen monitor and copy of *Photoshop*) and return with a shiny new magazine. It's 30 helpings of wonderfulness piled atop 40 helpings of loveliness, so don't even consider missing it.

Tub O' Reviews

Ninja Gaiden (no, really), *Dead Man's Hand*, *Auto Modelista*, *Mafia*, *Intellivision Lives*, *Judge Dredd: Dead vs. Death*, *MX Unleashed*, *Top Angler*, *Pitfall: The Lost Expedition*, *Falcone: Into the Maelstrom*, *Ghost Master*, *Alias*, *Pilot Down*, and so much more.

Hitman 3

IO Interactive's *Hitman 2* saw great success and provided plenty of fresh gameplay ideas. Now comes its sequel; expect plenty of gunplay, baldness, and a hefty dose of cold-blooded anti-heroism in this *Xbox Nation* exclusive.

Doom 3

The Satan-worshiping code warriors at id Software have been cooking up the next game in the series that solidified the love connection between the compound adjective "first-person" and the noun "shooter." *XBN* delivers the goods.

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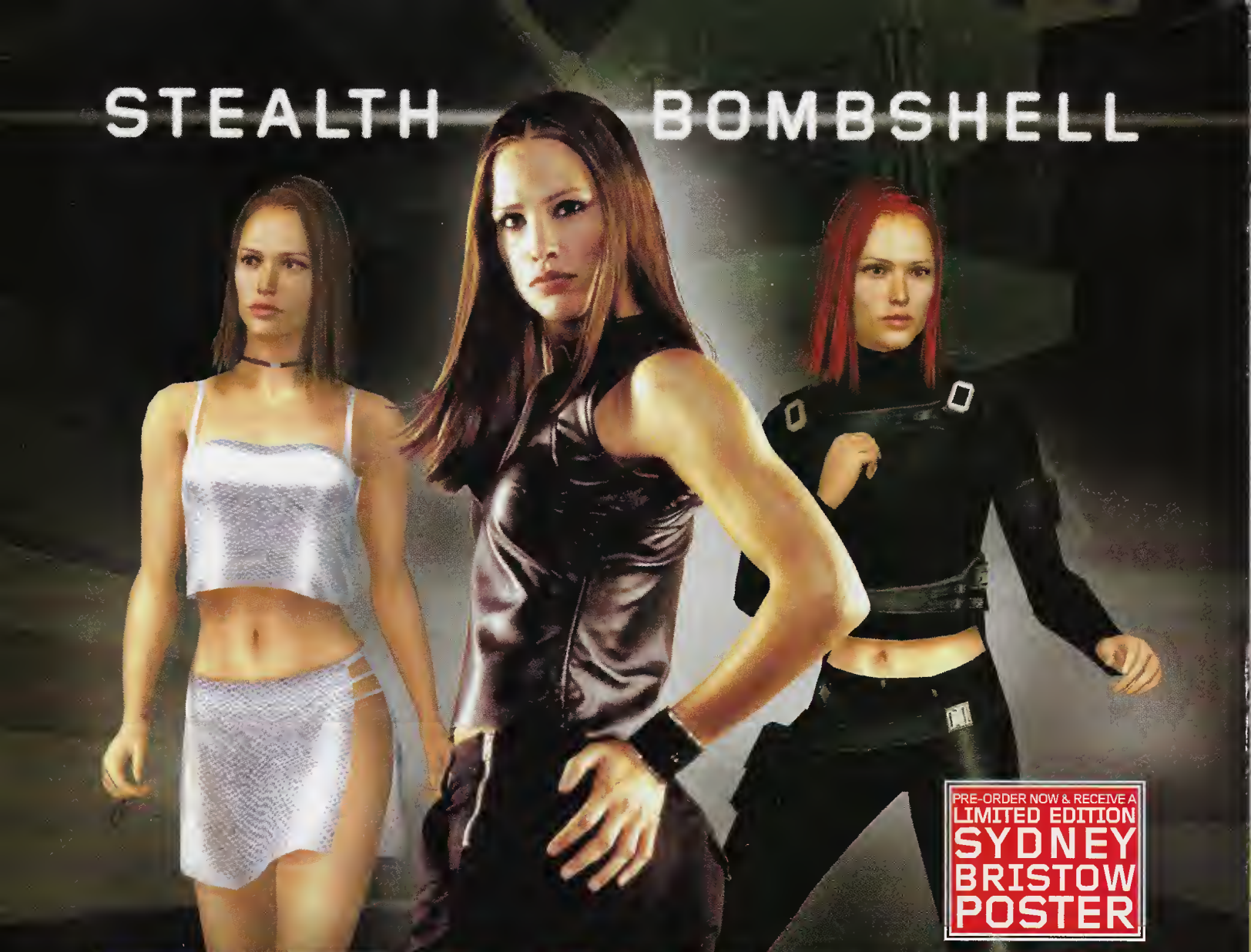

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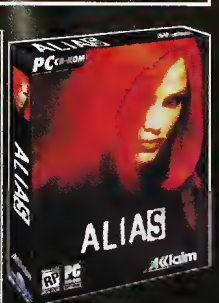

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